

JULY 1997



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'Escape Route'

by

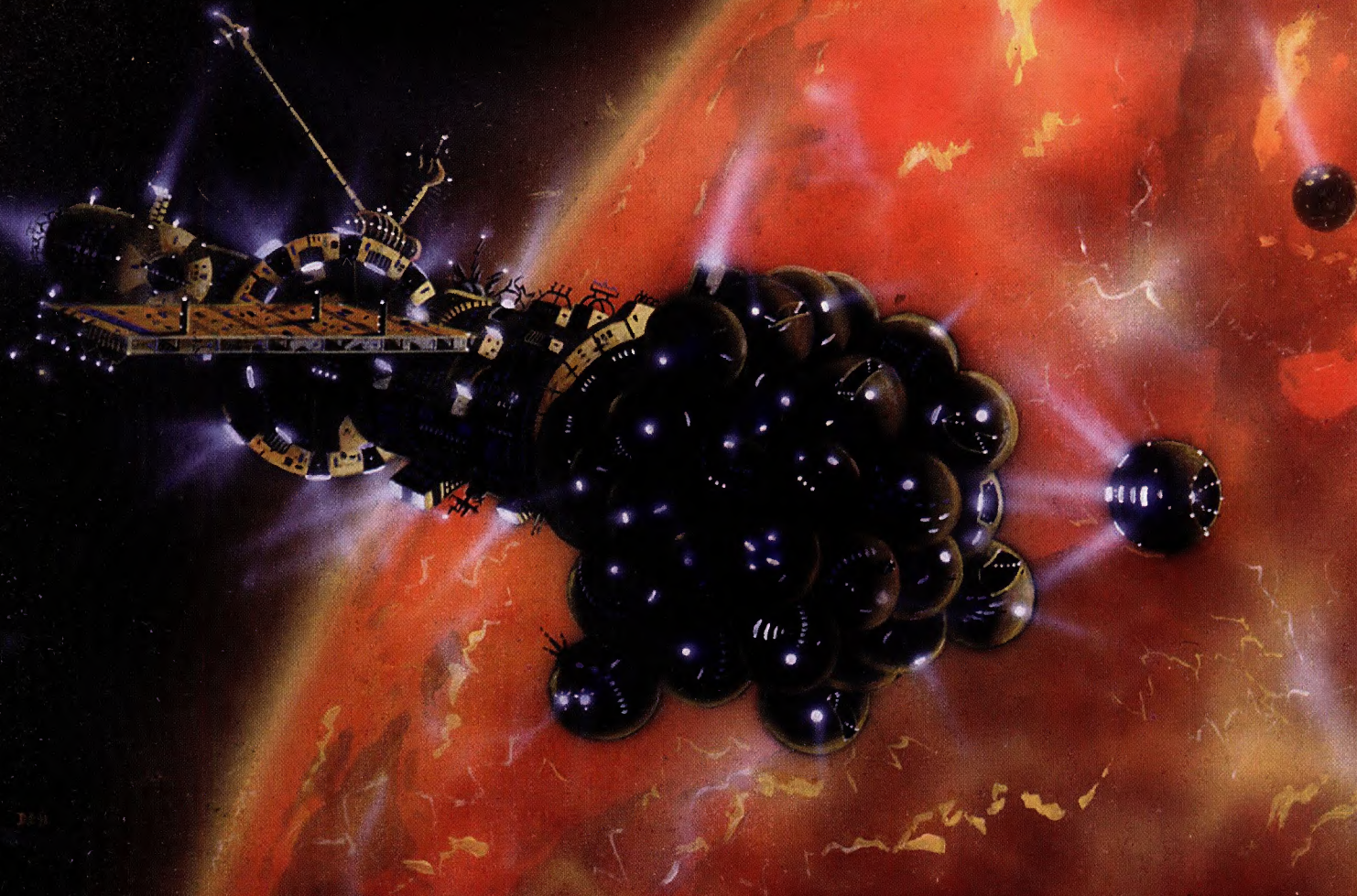
Peter F. Hamilton

plus new stories from

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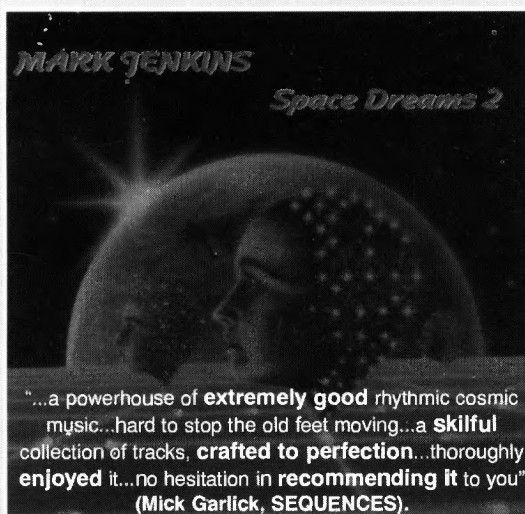
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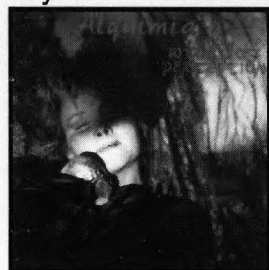
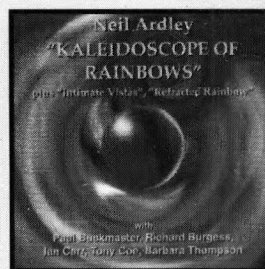
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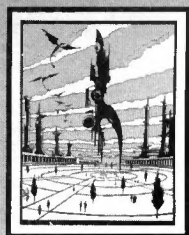
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Deputy Editor
Lee Montgomerie
Assistant Editors
Paul Annis,
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John Clute,
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Judith Hanna

Graphic Design and Typesetting
Paul Brazier

Subscriptions Secretary
Ann Pringle

Circulation Advisers

The Unlimited Dream Company

Interzone

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interZone

July 1997

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science fiction & fantasy

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Dear Editors:

Mainstream literature deals with real issues, with the struggle to understand the world and our place within it, the emotional and ethical dilemmas that people have to face, the joys, the comedies, farces, crimes and tragedies created by the way we live and the way we die. On the face of it, science fiction would seem uniquely placed to play an important part in this vital aspect of cultural exegesis, since science itself plays such a prominent role in shaping the modern world. The question, then, as Steven Pearce so rightly asks in issue 119, is why science fiction is mentioned in the same breath as Romance, Horror and the Western. I do not wholly share his view that the answer is to be found in an arts/science divide. The reason is more obvious. So much of it is escapist and unconvincing.

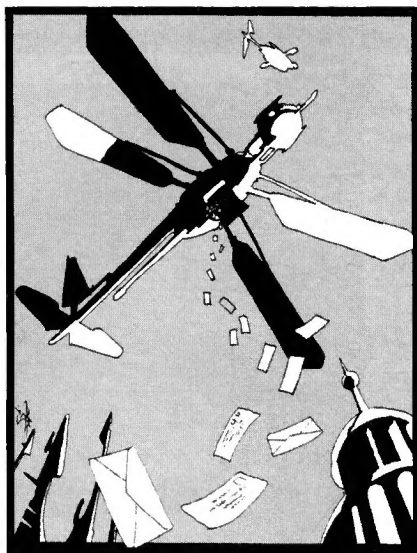
I am sure that most readers will recall the cityscape backdrop to the opening titles in Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, and not a few, I would imagine, inwardly groaned as I did when the date came onto the screen. I willingly paid to see this impressive film more than once, but remained under no illusion that the world presented to me was likely to come into being during my own lifetime, and rather resented the implication that I might be credulous enough to believe so.

Mainstream writers treat their audiences differently. Dennis Potter set *Cold Lazarus* in a more believable era, as did Hermann Hesse his advocates of *The Glass Bead Game*, and Aldous Huxley was wise enough to present his *Brave New World* without an AD label, as far as I remember. Only George Orwell was brave in this way, but in order to imply a political urgency in that most of his readers would live to see 1984.

My point about *Blade Runner* may seem trivial, but it is the visible sign of a far greater abandonment. This small, initial absurdity provoked in me, and perhaps not in me alone, the impression that the purpose of the fictional world created by the film was gratuitous escapism, and escapism augmented by the implication that one day the younger members of the audience would personally live under its shadow.

In other words, a deceit. And it is the deceitfulness of much science fiction that places the greatest obstacle in its path to acceptance in mainstream literature.

Space travel is at the heart of the problem. Space westerns like *Star Trek*, for example, which must have provided most peoples' introduction to



science fiction over the past two decades, propagate not only an escapist ideal but, far more importantly, a major cop-out that encapsulates the whole fraud. The nature of the universe beyond our Solar System has to be blatantly falsified in order for a starship to roam at will amongst exotic life-sustaining planets in the way that bounty-hunters once roamed the wild west, returning to far-flung settlements to settle old scores. And my emphasis is on *returning*.

The truth is that the heroine back at Star Base will never see her captain again, once he has left for the other side of the galaxy. At least, not without the introduction of a convenient, fictitious device such as warp drive, purposely introduced, not to elucidate or to anticipate scientific understanding but to conceal it. I repeat, to conceal it. The scientific truth is that expounded by Albert Einstein, and it is a pity that science fiction in general has not credited its readership with the intelligence or the desire to be shown a universe that operates within this paradigm, as it certainly does. Hyperspace, however much its utilization may be applauded as good, prophetic science fiction, is plainly a cheap attempt to ignore relativity and reduce the galaxy back down to the size of the world we already know.

Perhaps the whole of the genre rests upon a misunderstanding – that the subject of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* was a time machine. But this was not the subject of this great writer's early novel. Wells's time machine was a literary vehicle (excuse the pun) to enable his traveller to reach the very far future where human evolution was the subject. Wells was, after all, a biologist, not a physicist, and one writing at a

time when the theory of evolution was younger than the theory of relativity at the present day.

That intelligent readers might more readily embrace a science fiction that has the courage to explore not within a false paradigm but with real issues and with real science, is given encouragement by the results of your 1996 poll that places Stephen Baxter and Eric Brown's story "The Spacetime Pit" at number one. Congratulations to them. Like Wells's original, their story uses a time machine to propel a human interaction with the bizarre and sometimes frightening world revealed by real science. Real science fiction!

Richard Scott Robinson
Freshwater, Isle of Wight

Dear Editors:

Paul J. McAuley's description of the evidence for life on Mars in the October 1996 *Interzone* was outstanding. (I'm running very late, but catching up!) However, I think that all of the various sides debating the subject of extraterrestrial life are missing what recent discoveries about early life on Earth – and possibly on Mars – are really telling us. Nobody is looking at when different kinds of life appeared on Earth, and putting that into perspective with the wider history of the Solar System, and of the Galaxy. Doing so results in some interesting observations.

Life existed on Earth as far back as we can look, and it probably appeared more or less immediately after the final solidification of the crust. Some scientists speculate that it may have started even earlier, evolving again and again as the crust re-solidified after major impacts by asteroids and comets. If life did in fact appear on Mars, it must also have appeared very early in that world's history. This suggests that the initial evolution of primitive life may be "easy," and that this kind of life may be very common in the Galaxy.

It took almost half the predicted lifespan of our sun as a main-sequence star for single-celled organisms to learn to cooperate on a large scale and create complex life-forms. The Cambrian explosion, where great numbers of large complex species first appeared on Earth, occurred "only" 600 million years ago, about one-eighth of the Earth's present age. In our violent universe – full of exploding stars and infalling comets – it is an amazing piece of luck that Earth's environment remained sufficiently stable, for long enough, to allow that to take place.

So, single primitive "cells" appeared almost instantly; it took a

Interaction + Interaction + Interaction + Interaction

really, really long time for the independent cell to learn to get along with its fellow cell.

A second point: Earth's sun is actually a very old star, as the stellar population of the galaxy goes. At over four billion years, it is approximately a third of the estimated age of the Galaxy itself.

The Galaxy appears to have started out made almost exclusively of hydrogen and helium, and it is difficult to conceive of life composed only of those two elements. The complex heavy elements that we, and the planet we live on, are made of were generated by nucleosynthesis in the cores of early generations of very large stars. These giant stars quickly died in supernova explosions, spraying debris into nearby clouds of gas and dust and creating vast shock waves in the interstellar medium. The shock waves probably encouraged those clouds to collapse to form later generations of stars, and the new stellar systems incorporated the newly-synthesized heavy elements.

Our old sun, in its youth, may have been a member of the earliest generation of stars to have accumulated a high enough concentration of heavy, complex elements to have rocky, metal-bearing worlds. Worlds capable of supporting the kinds of complex life that might build a metal starship.

What all of that tells us is, simple life probably evolves easily but complex life is very, very difficult. It also tells us that we may, conceivably, be one of the first technological civilizations in our Galaxy. There have been large, intelligent animals on Earth for far more than 100 million years, yet only now do we see one that, potentially, could colonize the stars. Maybe space-faring technology isn't all that easy, either.

As we explore the Galaxy, we may find lots and lots of worlds with life similar to what we might have just found on Mars; but complex life like ourselves could still be very rare. We could be surrounded by life, and find ourselves with no one to talk to.

Donald F. Robertson

San Francisco

(donaldrf@hooked.net)

<http://www.hooked.net/~donaldrf/index.html>

Dear Editors:

Please could you help me, as I have a problem that has been niggling at me for some time. I feel that *Interzone* is best qualified to try and solve it. A few years ago, a friend of the family gave me a bag of science-fiction and fantasy books, one of which was entitled *Whodunit? Murder in Space*.

This particular book was the TV tie-in with a programme of the same name from Central Television. The idea was that you watched the first part of the programme, bought the book, which was again only the first part, and then tried to solve the murder for a worldwide competition (the book contained an entry form). However, by the time I received the book, the competition had long finished and I would have been too young to have seen it when it was on television.

Having read the first part of the story and attempted to solve the crime, I have to admit to myself that I am no Miss Marple, more like Inspector Clouseau! Alas, I cannot find the second part and therefore have no idea "whodunit," so, I was wondering whether anybody at *IZ* has any idea – and, if not, whether any other readers do. Better still, is there anybody who has got the second part of the mystery and would be prepared to sell it to me (for the going cost of a second-hand book)?

The first book's details are as follows: *Whodunit? Murder in Space*. Adapted by F. X. Woolf from a screenplay by Wesley Ferguson. Penguin, 1985, ISBN 0-14-008370-7. It says in the book that "F. X. Woolf is the pseudonym of a well-known crime novelist." Who is it?

Louise Dade

Clifton, Beds.

Editor: According to Randall D. Larson's *Films into Books: An Analytical Bibliography of Film Novelizations, Movie, and TV Tie-Ins* (Scarecrow Press, 1995) – the only place we can find mention of this elusive item – "F. X. Woolf" is Canadian crime novelist Howard Engel (born 1931), best known for his series of novels about a sleuth called Benny Cooperman. I'm afraid there's no record of a part two

of *Murder in Space* ever having been published. Does anyone have any further information?

Dear Editors:

I co-edit *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The first, second and fourth volumes, published in 1988, 1989 and 1991, won the World Fantasy Award for best anthology. The ninth annual collection will be out in July 1997. We are now reading for the tenth. This will include all material published in the year 1997.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science-fiction horror, psychological horror, or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 1997. The submission deadline is December 15th 1997. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1997. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 1997 you can send me galleys so that I can judge the stories in time. The sooner I get the material the better.

There is a section in front of the book that covers "the year in horror," and "the year in fantasy." These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" – material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, strange non-fiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 1998. When sending material to me please write **YEAR'S BEST HORROR** on the envelope.

Terri Windling reads only during the fall. Her address is: Casa Rincon, 11651 Calle Aurora, Tucson, Arizona 85748, USA.

She covers fantasy exclusively and I cover horror exclusively. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer about our choices.

Authors: please do not send me stories from magazines, anthologies or other publications that I am likely to see during the year. Only from obscure, non-genre publications.

Thank you.

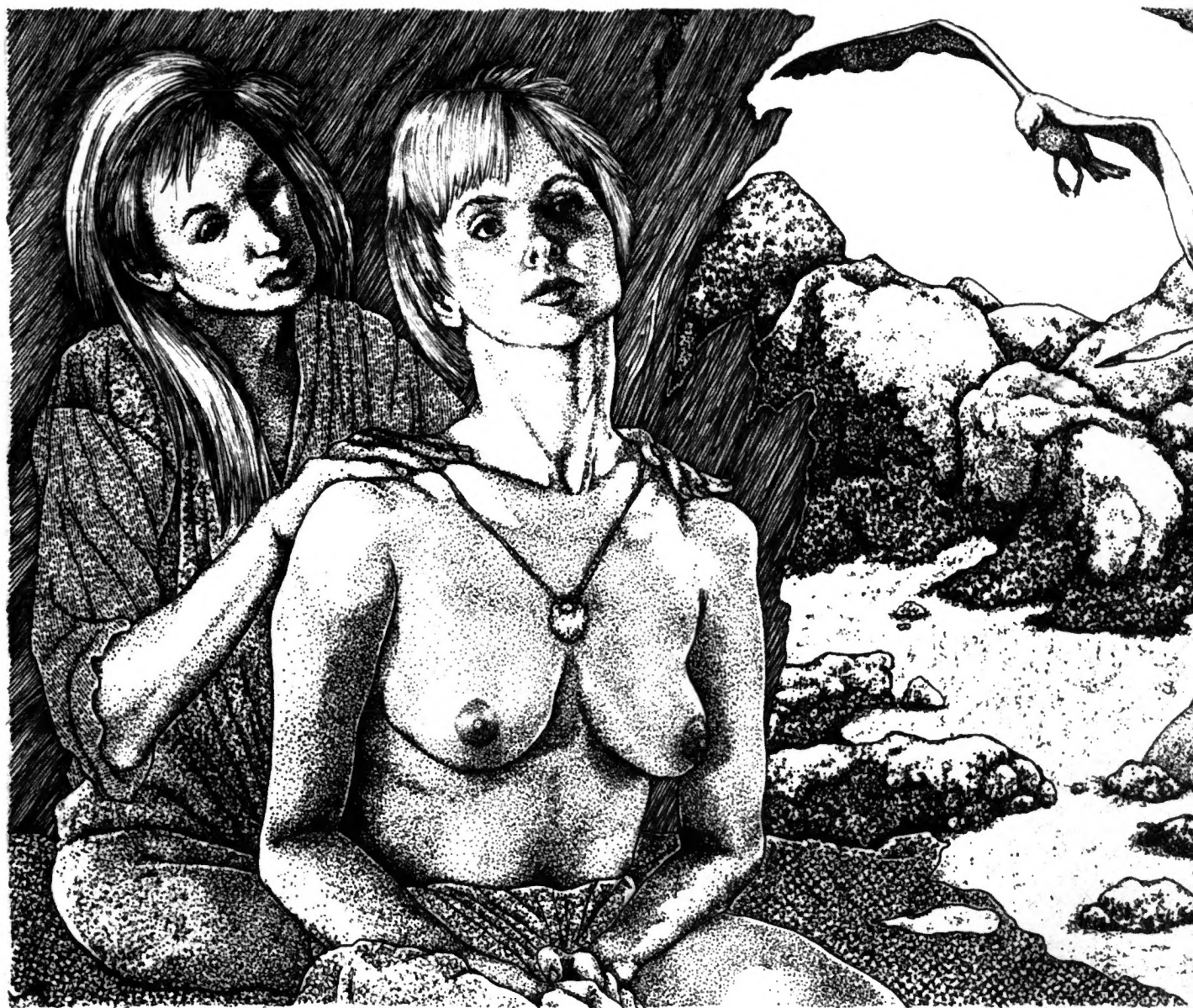
Ellen Datlow

c/o Omni Magazine – General Media International

277 Park Avenue, 4th Floor

New York, NY 10172-0003, USA





The morning after the storm, Jane/208 set off down the beach to see what the ocean had surrendered overnight. Flotsam was always more plentiful in the aftermath of a storm. It was as though the sea was trying to make up for having battered and buffeted the island all night long by offering up gifts in compensation for the dark, roaring hours of fear and sleeplessness.

The sky was ragged and torn, and an onshore wind gusted at Jane/208, forcing her to lean into it in order to keep her footing on the shingles, but the sun flared intermittently through gaps in the clouds, promising warmth to come. In its rays, the foam that flecked the wavetops was shot through with miniature rainbows.

Jane/208 passed clusters of seagulls squabbling over stranded fish and wave-crushed crabs. She was not looking for food. Others would be doing that, taking advantage of the harvest, scavenging above the tideline where the pickings were rich. Nor was she looking for fresh driftwood, though there was plenty of it about.

Sometimes, after storms, the ocean gave up something special; reached deep into its pockets and dug out something that been lying there for a long time, something precious and rare that only guilt and the desire to atone could have persuaded it to part with.

Jane/208 was searching for a gift for Jane/202. A piece of

glass that had been smoothed and polished by the tide would, when hung on a braided length of sun-dried kelp, make a fine pendant. A mother-of-pearl shell could be transformed by a craftswoman into a comb to hold up Jane/202's beautiful blonde hair. A shark's tooth would make for a brooch if Jane/208 took it to be scrimshawed; perhaps she could have her likeness engraved into it as a keepsake for her lover.

But what she was really hoping to come across was something made of metal. Gold, preferably, but since gold washed up once in a blue moon, she would happily settle for one of the duller, greyer varieties of metal. Any kind of metal, in fact, so long as it could be wrought into a ring.

Jane/208 had made up her mind to ask Jane/202 to be her sharer. They already lived together, had done so for seven bleedings, so it seemed the next logical step to solemnize their union with the ritual of exchanging gifts. And a ring, as Jane/208 saw it, was the ideal gift, representing as it did the beach that banded the island, the annular strip of shingle that shaped and limited the lives of the Parthenai.

Of course, it was by no means certain that Jane/202 would accept the ring and consent to become Jane/208's sharer. In fact, Jane/208 had a pretty good idea what Jane/202 would say when she asked. *Why ruin what we have? We love each other, are committed to each other. What difference will a couple of gifts and a short ceremony make?*



Illustrations by Russel Morgan

The Driftling

James
Lovegrove

No difference at all, and yet every difference in the world. Rituals and symbols meant a lot to Jane/208. Emotions, like the sea, were apt to change. A symbol gave permanence to a feeling. A ritual pegged a moment in memory, meaning it was less likely to be forgotten. Though Jane/208 was sure of her love for Jane/202, and almost as sure of Jane/202's love for her, still she wanted something tangible that would show Jane/202 how she felt and allow Jane/202 to demonstrate that she felt the same. That wasn't a lot to ask, was it?

As a matter of fact, knowing Jane/202, it probably was. But Jane/208 was nonetheless determined to go through with the ordeal of getting down on her knees before her and uttering the formal declaration of sharing – *You are my sister, my lover, my reflection, my matching half, the fullness of my moon* – even though there was a chance that Jane/202 would decline, even though it might conceivably mean the end of their relationship. Frightened though she was of rejection, Jane/208 was more frightened still of insecurity.

Soon the huddle of driftwood shelters was out of sight, and the beach stretched ahead of Jane/208 and the beach reached behind her, a curved, narrowing strip of grey in both directions, bounded by the sea on one side and on the other by a wall of black cliff spattered with streaks of bright white guano. What lay beyond the top of the cliff no

one knew, since its sides were unclimbably smooth and sheer, but it was generally assumed that the island was a flat-topped plateau of granite encircled by beach. Only the seagulls had any idea if this assumption was true or not, and they weren't telling.

Jane/208's hardened feet scarcely felt the pebbles beneath them. Even the sharp edges of shells were unable to penetrate the thick callouses on her soles. She crunched along, scanning the ground in front of her and stopping every so often when a glint caught her eye. Though she had long ago learned to distinguish between the gleam of a fish's scales and any other shiny object, this morning she made a point of not passing anything by, just in case, just on the off-chance.

She had been foraging unsuccessfully for as long as it took the tide to go out two body-lengths when she spied the congregation of seagulls up ahead. Instead of the usual three or four, dozens of them had gathered in one spot, and they were strutting and squawking and fussing and feuding the way they usually did when there was good food to be had, but none of them was actually eating anything. Which meant that whatever it was that had drawn them was not dead.

Immediately Jane/208 thought, *Whale*. And with that thought came a twinge of annoyance. If it was a beached

whale, she was obliged to go back to the village and report it, so that a team of volunteers could come with carts and knives to slaughter the creature and flense it of its meat and blubber. As the whale's finder, Jane/208 would have to be a part of that team, and this meant that, basically, the rest of the day was no longer hers.

She toyed with the idea of ignoring the whale, strolling past as if it wasn't there, but her sense of duty was too strong, her loyalty to the tribe too deeply ingrained. Cursing her luck, she dragged her unwilling feet forwards to where the seagulls were flocking.

The birds saw her coming and grudgingly cleared a path for her. Those that didn't waddle out of the way quickly enough she motivated with a kick. They closed ranks behind her, until she was standing at the centre of a ragged circle of white wings and grey-feathered backs and tossing yellow beaks and jet eyes.

It was not a whale.

It was a woman, lying face down on the shingles, the waves seething around her legs.

Not just a woman, either. At least, she was like no woman Jane/208 had laid eyes on before. The contours of her legs and back were wrong. Her buttocks were covered in matted hair; so were her shoulders. And there was something down there, down between her thighs. Some kind of growth or goitre, such as sometimes developed on the bodies of older Parthenai.

Jane/208 could hardly bring herself to touch this strange being, but she had to make sure she was alive.

The woman had been in the water for quite some while. Her skin was cold, white and wrinkled. But in the flesh beneath, there was warmth. In the big vein at her neck, a flutter.

"Bad luck, my friends," Jane/208 told the seagulls, and bent to drag the woman up the beach where she would be beyond the reach of the sea when it came thundering back in.

The sun had broken up the clouds, reducing them to a few tattered wisps of white, when Jane/208 returned with Jane/197, Jane/211 and Jane/211's daughter, Jane/243. It was just past the peak of the day, and the black cliff gleamed so fiercely it was almost painful to look at.

Jane/197 had scoffed at Jane/208's excited claims about discovering a woman, saying that the sea only produced fish and *things*, not people. Never mind that Jane/208 insisted that she had actually touched the woman, had pulled her up the beach; Jane/197 considered Jane/208 a dreamy sort whose imagination too often got the better of her. Nonetheless, she had agreed to come because she thought that what Jane/208 had taken for a near-drowned woman was a seal or a manatee, and she fancied the idea of a new fur tunic or a new pair of boots. Hence she was equipped with two kinds of knife – one with a whelk-shell blade for paring, the other with a clam-shell blade for hacking, both fitted with bone handles – and Jane/211 and Jane/243 were pushing an offal cart.

The seagulls were still there, more of them than before, but Jane/208 saw to her relief that they were keeping a respectful distance from the woman. The seagulls, in common with most creatures whose diet consisted mainly of carrion, were as cowardly as they were patient. They could wait for ever for a meal to die but none of them was bold enough to hasten the process along.

Their cries turned raucous and angry as the four Parthenai beat a path through them to the body.

"Jane/208," said Jane/197 stiffly, "please accept my humble apologies." She stared down at the woman. "Well, this is news. No boots or tunic for me today, but a driftling thing to show the rest of the tribe, that's for sure."

Jane/243 knelt and ran a cautious hand over the woman's hairy shoulders. "It's soft," she said. "Like fledgling down."

"Will we be able to get her into the cart?" Jane/211 wanted to know.

"I *did* suggest we build a stretcher," said Jane/208, "like we do when we have to take someone to Mother Cave who's too sick to walk."

"Never mind that," said Jane/197. "We'll have to make do with what we've got. Each of you take a leg, Jane/208 and Jane/211. Jane/243 and I will both take an arm."

They hoisted the driftling up and carried her to the cart, resting her on its rim.

"Ready?" said Jane/197.

The other three nodded, and carefully they rolled the driftling over and lowered her backside-first into the cart, bending and angling her legs so that she would fit.

"Ugh!" exclaimed Jane/243, pointing at the knot of bulbous fleshy lumps that nestled at the driftling's crotch. "Mother, what is *that*?"

Jane/211 prodded one of the lumps tentatively. "Some kind of wart?" she hazarded.

"Tumours, by the looks of it," said Jane/197. "And one of them's split open."

"That must hurt," said Jane/211.

"What about this?" said Jane/208, indicating the driftling's face.

They all peered at the fuzz of hair that coated her cheeks and jaw.

"Some of the elders have that," said Jane/211.

"But none as dark and bristly," said Jane/208. "And besides, it can only be about a hundred bleedings since she was a girl."

"There's another of those lumps at the front of her throat," said Jane/243.

"And see the shape of her breasts?" said Jane/211.

"Are they breasts at all?" Jane/197 wondered, eyeing the muscular, hirsute planes of the driftling's chest.

"She has teats," Jane/208 remarked doubtfully.

"All very strange," said Jane/197. "Come on, let's get her back to the village and away from these damned birds. They're making such a racket I can't hear myself think."

They took it in turns to push the cart along the beach. The driftling was heavy and the cart, despite its broad wheels, ploughed deep into the shingles, making the going hard. They rested on several occasions and gnawed on strips of fish jerky for strength. A train of seagulls followed them all the way home, gliding in their wake like wind-blown thistledown.

It was decided that Jane/208, who had found the driftling, should have the responsibility of looking after her. Jane/202 was not best pleased at the idea of having to share their shelter, cramped as it already was, with a third party, but Jane/197, whom Jane/202 respected, convinced her that there was room, reminding her that duty to others came before anything else. Jane/208 rolled out the bed-matting on the shingle floor and they placed the driftling gently there. The driftling had not stirred or uttered a

sound since Jane/208 had discovered her. The sleep that held her was profound, deathlike. But still a pulse beat in her neck, faintly, like a kelp-flea hopping.

They wrapped her in a patchwork blanket, hiding her unnatural flat-chestedness, her angular, hairy body and that deformity between her legs. Then they went outside, sat in the shade of the shelter's awning and debated in low voices.

Jane/208 was all for someone going to Mother Cave and asking her advice. Jane/211 agreed, since it was well-known that Mother Cave had all the answers.

"Maybe," said a surly Jane/197, "but it seems to me she's forgetting more and more of them every day."

Three bleedings ago Jane/197's sharer, Jane/190, broke her ankle and was taken to Mother Cave to have the injury tended to and mended. She did not return, and when asked Mother Cave could not explain what had happened other than that she had made some sort of error. She did not apologize; she seemed confused but not at all perturbed. Jane/197, understandably, had been deeply suspicious of Mother Cave ever since, and never missed an opportunity to cast doubt on her wisdom and infallibility.

"Perhaps Mother Cave isn't all she used to be," said Jane/208, "but she still has more knowledge about more things than the rest of us put together."

"Who says?"

"Everyone, Jane/197."

"Not me. Not a lot of the Parthenai I talk to."

"Still," said Jane/211, "what harm can it do if one of us goes?"

"But which one?" said Jane/202, in a tone of voice that suggested she was hoping it wouldn't have to be her.

"You're so keen, Jane/208," said Jane/197. "You do it."

Jane/208, realising that if she didn't go no one else would, begged Jane/202 to accompany her. Jane/202 was initially reluctant, saying she had far better things to do, but Jane/208 was persistent, and finally Jane/202 sighed and said all right, she would walk with her as far as the entrance to Mother Cave but no further.

Jane/211 wished them good luck, and together they set off up the beach.

Finding the driftling had driven all thoughts of gifts and asking Jane/202 to be her sharer out of Jane/208's head, but now, in turn, her excitement and curiosity were ousted by trepidation. A visit to Mother Cave was always associated with pain and difficulty. The Parthenai went to Mother Cave for one of five reasons: to get advice, to conceive a child, to give birth to a child, to be cured of an ailment, and to die. All of these involved some degree or other of suffering.

Mother Cave stood at the top of the beach overlooking the village like a giant, empty eye-socket. The well-tended rockpool garden that surrounded the cavemouth could only be crossed by a series of stepping stones. The bed of the delta-shaped rockpool was purple with pulsing anemones, its waters speckled with silvery winks of sprat.

Mother Cave herself hollowed unfathomably far into the cliff. No tribeswoman had ever dared to investigate beyond the first two chambers, but it was generally believed that on the other side of the second chamber's door Mother Cave continued for ever, like the beach, like the sea, whose only limits were those that the eye imposed.

Pausing at the edge of the rockpool garden, Jane/208 begged a good-luck kiss off Jane/202, then turned and walked across the stepping stones.



The cavemouth, three times as tall as she was, yawned around her, and she felt very small and pitifully nervous as she ventured into the darkness within.

In still air, hush and shadow she paused to allow her eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. Gradually the dim outlines of stalactites became clear, and she could detect the faint hum of Mother Cave dreaming. She moved slowly to the centre of the first chamber, her feet whispering on the smooth floor, and there, before a rusted, thronelike chair, she halted and inclined her head respectfully.

"Mother Cave?"

There was a groaning and a stirring from deep within Mother Cave's walls, and something sputtered and sparked, and a glass sphere half encrusted with smooth nodules of sedimentary deposit flickered and began to glow. One bright green eye snapped into life on the side of a large metal box, and the rusted chair shifted its arms and seat like a living thing, its joints whirring. In the next chamber along lights stuttered then shone, illuminating a steel table over which needles and scalpels were poised on armatures, all lustreless and corroded. Jane/208 averted her gaze from that room. You didn't have to know what went on in there (although she did) to tell that it had played host to more than its fair share of agony. Dark stains patterned the floor.

Name/number?

Mother Cave's voice reverberated aching through Jane/208's skull.

"Jane/208, daughter of Jane/151, grand-daughter of Jane/93," she replied, speaking softly, because then Mother Cave would adjust her volume accordingly.

State your purpose, said Mother Cave, her boom subdued.

"We need advice on a certain matter, Mother Cave."

Sit.

Nervously Jane/208 lowered herself into the chair. Its cold, damp surfaces chilled her skin, sending waves of gooseflesh undulating across her arms and legs. She braced herself.

The chair altered its dimensions to accommodate her tightly, then, with a squeal of servomotors, a helmet shaped like a jellyfish descended from between two stalactites and came to a halt a hand's-breadth above the crown of her head. On pointed tips its tentacles danced over her face and scalp, searching, testing, and she winced in anticipation, clenching her teeth.

"Ah!"

She gasped as her skin was pierced in a dozen places at once. Pins of pain prickled around her eyebrows, ears, temples and at the top of her spinal column. She forced herself to keep calm. This was the worst of it. What came next was unpleasant but at least did not hurt.

She closed her eyes, and with a sudden whoosh she was wrenched out of herself, hurtling upwards into the soul-womb of Mother Cave, diving dizzily up through a darkness lit with mercurial flashes of white. A surge of sparkles, like stars being cast across the heavens, fading to black, and then she was floating suspended in a warm, dark place where there was no sense of up or down, no night or day, just an eternal, lulling, tidal rhythm, and when Mother Cave spoke again, her voice came from all around Jane/208 and inside her.

What would you ask of me?

Jane/208 made a conscious effort not to frame her

thoughts in words and to think in images, but all the same she suspected that her body, wherever it was, was speaking aloud. She explained to Mother Cave about the driffling woman, going over the events of the day in detail – her actions, her feelings, even, regrettably, her reluctance to report what she had thought to be a beached whale – until she felt she had provided every scrap of relevant information, and then she let her mind go blank to indicate that she desired a reply.

Mother Cave was silent for an unusually long time.

Then she said: **A threat is posed to the tribe. The system will not continue to function peacefully and harmoniously while this random element remains unchecked. However, further deliberation is called for before an appropriate course of action can be determined. Consult me again when this "driffling" regains consciousness. Disengaging.**

A vertiginous plummet, and Jane/208 was back in her body again, feeling sick and woozy. The helmet disconnected its tentacles, and she reached up and rubbed the tiny tingling swellings on her skin where they had been attached. Then she clambered shakily to her feet, hurried out of Mother Cave, darted across the rockpool garden and fell, trembling with relief, into Jane/202's arms.

"And?" said Jane/202. "What are we to do? What has Mother Cave decreed?" She laid a gently sarcastic emphasis on the last word.

"What we would have done anyway," Jane/208 replied. "We look after the driffling. For now."

For three days and three nights the driffling lay on the bed-matting, breathing shallowly, scarcely moving. In all that time Jane/208 never left her side. Visitors came to the shelter and were allowed to peer in through the door flap, but most found their curiosity easily assuaged. Wrapped in a blanket, the driffling's most unusual features were hidden, leaving only her facial hair and the lump in the centre of her throat to demonstrate her strangeness.

Her provenance was another question altogether, one that was frequently discussed by the Parthenai as they went about their daily business. Since she wasn't one of them, that meant she must come from another tribe, another island. The received wisdom was that there were no other islands out there, that the Parthenai occupied the last spit of land left high and dry by the ocean. So Mother Cave maintained, at any rate, but plainly she had been misguided. (Some of the tribeswomen, not least among them Jane/197, suggested that Mother Cave might even have been lying.) And if there was one other tribe out there, might there not be several more? And if so, what were they like? Were they friendly? Hostile? The implications were enormous, and the village buzzed with speculation.

But for Jane/208 this kind of talk was irrelevant. For her, everything was reduced to the simple issue of whether the driffling lived or died.

She tried feeding her bladderwrack broth, spooning it between her salt-cracked lips, but the driffling swallowed only a few drops and the rest spilled out of the sides of her mouth. She massaged her limbs regularly, trying to work some warmth into her cold, resilient flesh, and at night she snuggled up to her, hoping to impart some of her own body heat. In this practice she managed to persuade Jane/202 to join her, although Jane/202 said she felt awkward and stupid doing it.

In fact, Jane/202 was enjoying the attention that the driftling was bringing her. Around the evening fires, when the whole tribe gathered for a meal and songs and stories, Parthenai young and old would bombard her with queries about the stranger lying unconscious in her and Jane/208's shelter, and during the days she was constantly giving updates on the progress of the patient's recovery to anyone who enquired. That there was little change in the driftling's condition from day to day presented no problem. The nature of her freakish deformities alone was enough to provoke a lengthy discussion, and Jane/202's descriptions of her unusual hair and growths became ever more elaborate and exaggerated.

Jane/208 was pleased that, even if only in a roundabout way, she was the one who had brought Jane/202 this popularity, but at the same time she wished Jane/202 would stop treating the driftling as just some bizarre novelty. For all her physical peculiarities, for all that she had been disgorged by the ocean more drowned than alive, the driftling was still a human being. She might not be Parthenai, but she was still a sentient creature.

On the fourth day, the driftling awoke.

It was noon. The air was still and unforgivingly hot, and most of the tribe sat under awnings or floated in the sea to keep cool. Jane/208 sweltered quietly indoors, naked but for a sheen of sweat. At first she didn't believe that the figure on the bed-matting was moving; she thought confinement and the heat had begun conspiring to play tricks on her mind. Then the driftling gave a low groan and coughed twice, dryly. Her eyelids flicked apart. Her irises were green like the phosphorescence that glimmers within breaking waves at night.

Jane/208 crawled to her side, knelt, and smiled down encouragingly. The driftling frowned back, puzzled. Blinking, she raised her head, looked at Jane/208's breasts, then slumped back onto the bed-matting.

The first word she said, in a voice like coarse shale, Jane/208 did not recognize.

Barely a whisper. "Christ."

The driftling then tried to raise her head again, but her strength ebbed and she abandoned the attempt. She rolled her eyes around, struggling to focus on the shelter's driftwood walls and the carved bone ornaments and the brittle dried-seaweed sculptures with which they were decorated. It all seemed to be too much to take in, so the eyes returned their gaze to Jane/208, asking questions that the driftling's throat, possibly on account of that solid-looking lump, was unable to iterate.

"I'll fetch you something to drink," Jane/208 said, but by the time she had returned from the barrels with a cup of sea-cooled rainwater, the driftling had lapsed back into unconsciousness.

When Jane/202 came in from bathing shortly afterwards, Jane/208 told her what had happened and asked her to keep watch over the driftling while she went and consulted Mother Cave again.

"Must I?"

"Unless you want to visit Mother Cave instead," Jane/208 replied, a little more irritably than she might have liked.

"But why should I have to do anything for her at all?" Jane/202 whined. "She's *your* responsibility."

"Now there's a surprise. The way you've been going on about her these past couple of days, anyone would have

thought she was *yours*."

"We can't all be as dedicated as you are to helping others, Jane/208. Some of us have lives to be getting on with."

"I've only been doing what Mother Cave told me to do."

"Some of us think that too much store is put by what Mother Cave tells us to do. Some of us think we should make decisions for ourselves."

"By 'some of us' you mean Jane/197."

"Among others," said Jane/202. Jane/197's opinions were gaining currency among the Parthenai, not because they were right, necessarily, but because Jane/197 stated them with an irresistible authority and charisma.

"I'm not going to get into that now," Jane/208 said. She was too tired to prolong the argument. "I'm just asking for one small favour, Jane/202. Please?"

Reluctantly, sullenly, Jane/202 consented.

Yes?

In the chair, in Mother Cave's soul-womb, Jane/208 mentally replayed the driftling's awakening.

That is good. Still, there is insufficient data to formulate a plan of action. More time and information is needed. The driftling must be brought to me for examination and interrogation.

Jane/208 made it clear that she had done her best but the driftling was still too weak to communicate with Mother Cave.

Understood. For now, continue to look after her. In addition, do everything you can to ensure that she has as little contact as possible with the rest of the tribe.

Jane/208 wanted to know why, but Mother Cave could not be coaxed to elaborate.

If anyone asks why you are keeping the driftling from them, say it is because I told you to do so. That will be explanation enough.

Jane/208 hoped so, but in her heart of hearts she was none too sure.

The driftling was lying on her side with her eyes open when Jane/208 re-entered the shelter. Jane/202 was hunkered on the shingles in the opposite corner, staring at her. The driftling was staring back. Between them hung an atmosphere of bemused antagonism.

"She squeezed me," Jane/202 said.

"What?"

"I had my back to her, I was kneeling, bending over, wringing out my hair, and suddenly I felt this hand on my buttock and she *squeezed* me."

She sounded so mortally affronted, Jane/208 had to laugh.

"It's not funny."

"No, of course not."

"*Real*."

Jane/208 looked over at the driftling. "I'm sorry?"

Hard-scabbed lips struggled to shape words. "Real. Had to see if she was. Real."

"Oh yes," said Jane/202, "she talks, too. Though I can't say I much care for her voice."

"Who are you?" Jane/208 asked the driftling. "Do you have a name?"

The driftling weakly waved a hand: either she couldn't remember or it didn't matter.

Jane/208 would have pressed her further had Jane/202 not chosen that moment for a dramatic exit, getting up

and flouncing out of the shelter, tossing the door flap aside.

"Wait!" Jane/208 followed her out, seized her by the arm and turned her around. "Wait. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. All I know is, I'm not staying in there with her a moment longer. I'll find another shelter. Arrange for a new one to be built, if I have to. I don't like having to share our space with a *freak* who doesn't have any respect for another person's body."

"Ssh, keep your voice down."

"Freak! Freak! Freak! Freak! Freak!" Jane/202 leaned into the doorway. "*Freak!*"

"All right then, Jane/202, if that's how you're going to be," said Jane/208 calmly. She knew she ought to be imploring her lover to stay. That was what Jane/202 wanted. A little bit of abasement and she would soften. But just then Jane/208 was too exhausted, too irritable and too full of pride to want to play such games, and besides, given Mother Cave's instruction that the driftling should be kept away from the rest of the Parthenai, Jane/202 leaving was probably a blessing in disguise. For Jane/202's own good, Jane/208 decided to let her go. It hurt, but then so did all sacrifices, and she prayed that, when the driftling was well enough to fend for herself, there would be a chance for her and Jane/202 to make amends, to reconcile, to start over.

"Tell everybody," she simply said, "that Mother Cave has advised that for the time being no one but me is to have any contact with the driftling."

"Did she give a reason?" Jane/208's coolness had disappointed Jane/202.

"She didn't have to. She's Mother Cave."

"Of course," Jane/202 said with a contemptuous snort. "She's Mother Cave."

Jane/208 watched Jane/202 stride away, tossing her damp blonde hair and stamping great dents in the shingles. She felt her eyes prickle with tears and she sniffed them back hard, telling herself to be brave, to think of the tribe rather than herself. It wasn't much comfort, but it was the best she could manage under the circumstances. She turned and went back into the shelter.

"I'm sorry about that," she said to the driftling. "Now, are you hungry?"

Warily the driftling nodded.

"Well then, let's get you something to eat."

Thanks to Jane/208's ministrations, the driftling's condition slowly improved. Her eyes gained a lustre, she was able to sit upright for longer and longer periods of time, and after much straining she succeeded in squeezing out a couple of small stools which Jane/208 disposed of beneath the pebbles as conscientiously as a mother would her infant's. When the moon waxed full and the time for bleeding came around, however, she realized that the driftling still had some way to go before her recovery was complete because, while every tribeswoman of child-bearing age went around stanching for three days, the driftling did not leak so much as a drop. No doubt the tumours between her legs were interfering with her menstrual functions, just as the lump in her throat was interfering with her speech, but that only added weight to Jane/208's diagnosis: in someone who was not pregnant – and the driftling was clearly not – the absence of bleeding was a sure sign of ill-health.

They talked infrequently. Conversation was hard for the driftling. Not only did she find it an effort to speak, but every question Jane/208 asked her about her tribe and her

island and her village caused her agonies of confusion. She didn't know her name. She could remember nothing of where she came from or how she came to be floating in the sea. All she could recall was a storm and being thrown into waves that tossed her about and tore the clothes from her back like a child tearing the wings off an insect.

Jane/208 knew about amnesia: Jane/186, daughter of Jane/134, had stumbled once and concussed herself on a rock, and for several days afterward had been unable to remember her own name-number or recognize the faces of any of her sisters, until, of course, Mother Cave had restored her to her senses. Once Mother Cave got her metaphorical hands on the driftling, she, too, would recall everything.

Jane/208 was too tactful and embarrassed to ask the driftling about her deformities and facial hair. She reckoned that the driftling herself would talk about those when she was ready.

The driftling seemed perpetually fascinated by her surroundings, and Jane/208 often found her peering out through the gaps between the slats of the shelter's walls, watching the village and the Parthenai who wandered by. She asked to be allowed to go out and walk around, but Jane/208 explained that this was impossible. When asked why, Jane/208 replied that Mother Cave had said so. When asked who Mother Cave was, Jane/208 found herself unable offer an adequate answer.

"Mother Cave is our nurse, our goddess, our keeper," she said, but that didn't even begin to describe Mother Cave's importance, her power, her influence over the Parthenai. How could you encapsulate in mere words the place/person were life began and life was maintained and life ended?

Jane/208's devotion to caring for the driftling was absolute. She left the shelter only to fetch food or water, and if visitors came she turned them away at the door flap politely but firmly, using Mother Cave's name to lend the rejections authority. She could not realize that, at the nightly fire gatherings, Jane/197 was using her selfless dedication as an example of the absurd lengths to which the Parthenai went to indulge Mother Cave's whims.

"What do we have to fear from this stranger?" said Jane/197 to the assembled tribe one evening. "Nothing! Yet Mother Cave would keep her from us until she has resolved what to do about her, as if we are children incapable of making decisions for ourselves. And she gets Jane/208 – poor, innocent, faithful Jane/208 – to do her dirty work for her. Are these the actions of an entity we should trust? Does this fill you with confidence that Mother Cave is the one to whom we should look for direction?"

There were murmurs to the effect that Mother Cave's will was not to be disputed, her motives were not to be questioned, and it was unwise to risk incurring her anger because, if she so wished, Mother Cave could refuse to heal the sick, refuse to get would-be mothers with child, and then what would become of the tribe?

Jane/197 answered them with a haughty laugh and a glittering eye. "I'm not saying that we should do without her altogether, for Mother Cave fulfils many a useful purpose. I'm merely saying that rather than devote ourselves slavishly to her as we do, we should have faith in *ourselves* to act wisely and independently, without feeling we have to run and ask her opinion every time one of us stubs a toe or cracks a fingernail. Mother Cave is old and not always reliable. Something that Jane/190, if you'll recall, found

out to her cost."

"And who would take her place as arbiter and chief decision-maker?" someone grumbled. "You?"

"I can think of worse candidates," said Jane/197.

Restless in the shelter, Jane/208 and the driftling listened to the distant voices of the gathering, as they had on previous evenings.

"I would like to meet. These other women some. Time," said the driftling.

"Until Mother Cave says you can, it is impossible."

"I. Would like to meet. Mother Cave too."

"That will surely happen."

"What are. They talking about out there? It sounds. Like they're arguing."

"They are, though I can't quite make out what they're saying." Jane/208 thought, however, that she had a pretty good idea what the topic of discussion was. One voice was dominating: Jane/197's. "They should start singing the songs and telling the stories soon, I hope. Would you like me to join in when they do, so that you can hear them?"

"That would be. Nice. Jane/208, you've. Been very kind. To me."

"My duty."

"I find myself. Thinking very fond. Thoughts about you."

"Thank you."

The debate eventually subsided, and the songs and stories began. Jane/208 recognized each by its tune or by the cadence of its opening lines, and she knew them all, word for word. The Tale of a Turtle, the Ballad of the Lost Albatross, Leda and the Little Dolphin, How the Walrus Won Her Whiskers – she sang or spoke along to each, to the driftling's evident delight.

The climax was, as always, a retelling of the story of the creation of the Parthenai. Four generations ago, the First Jane came to the island, travelling alone across the swelling sea in an ark of iron, the rusting remnants of which could still be found among the Parthenai's shelters: here a strut used to prop up a doorway, there a scrap of tarpaulin offering a rainproof roof. With her she brought the raw materials required to build Mother Cave, and also the egg, extracted from her own body, that became Jane/2, whom she raised up wise and strong. Mother and daughter lived happily on the beach together, their every need tended to by Mother Cave, but as time went by the First Jane grew old and unwell, until soon she was sick beyond the power of Mother Cave to cure. When the day came that she was so ill she could barely breathe, she begged Jane/2 to help her walk up to Mother Cave, and there she bade her only daughter farewell, assuring her that Mother Cave would continue to look after her and any daughters she might have. And then the First Jane disappeared into the second chamber of Mother Cave, and was never seen again.

"We Parthenai are the descendants of Jane/2," said Jane/208, intoning the words along with the other tribeswomen outside by the fires, "and through her we are all joined to the First Jane."

With that, the Parthenai fell silent, and Jane/208 with them, her throat dry and her tongue tired from so much talking.

"Thank you," said the driftling.

"You're welcome," said Jane/208, and lay down on the shingles, curled up and closed her eyes.

The gathering dispersed, and the Parthenai drifted back



to their shelters, muttering amongst themselves. Jane/208 heard nothing: she was fast asleep.

So deeply asleep that when felt a hand touch her between the legs, she assumed it was Jane/202's, forgetting that Jane/202 no longer lived in the shelter, and she let it caress her and murmured her lover's name sweetly. Somewhere between dreaming and waking she imagined she saw Jane/202 crouching over her, the glossy swoop of her blonde hair hanging around the curve of her neck and down over one breast, the other breast standing proud in all its firm, conical glory, and at this the rubbing at her crotch summoned a delicious, blooming warmth.

Jane/202 had come back. Her lover had come back.

The caressing stopped, and Jane/208 moaned softly in disappointment, and then she heard a grunt and a shifting of pebbles and smelled a strange, sharp scent she didn't recognize. Somewhere in the atavistic deeps of her mind the scent awoke an ancient anxiety. She stirred. She ordered her eyes to open, but her body was too enervated to obey her brain straight away.

Hands rolled her roughly onto her back. Something jabbed at the soft intimacy of her genitalia. Not a finger. Too blunt, too thick.

Now her eyes snapped open and she found herself staring up at the driffling.

The driffling, frowning in concentration, was crouched between Jane/208's legs and fumbling with the tumours, the uppermost of which, the split one, had become grotesquely distended while the lower pair, by contrast, had shrivelled tightly up, as though the other was sapping the lifestuff out of them.

And Jane/208 realized, with a shock of horrified disgust, that the driffling was trying to shove the raw-looking head of the split one *into her*.

It was a simple matter for Jane/208 to deliver a stunning blow to the side of the driffling's head. All the Parthenai, by virtue of their harsh lifestyle, were lithe, wiry and sinewy-strong. The driffling slumped to one side, groaning, and Jane/208 aimed a revolted punch at the three throbbing tumours.

The driffling shrieked horribly and clutched herself into a ball. A spurt of vomit coughed from her mouth.

Jane/208 did not need to raise the alarm. In heartbeats, a dozen of her sisters had appeared at the entrance to her shelter.

"What's going on?"

"What happened?"

"Who was that screaming?"

Jane/197 shouldered her way through the crowd, Jane/202 in her wake, and crawled in through the doorway. She took one look at the writhing driffling, and then at Jane/208 (flushed, furious, fearful), and nodded as if she had suspected all along that something like this might happen. As Jane/208 haltingly explained the nature of the driffling's assault on her, Jane/197's nods only deepened.

"Clearly those tumours are some kind of parasite," Jane/197 said. "They were forcing her to spread their infection to another host: you, Jane/208. That must be why she was thrown out from her own tribe and abandoned to the mercies of the sea. Well, *we* can cure her of what ails her."

Jane/197 drew a knife from her belt and gestured to a couple of the tribeswomen outside to come in. They obeyed her unhesitatingly.

Jane/208, looking at the driffling, pitiful in her pain and

helplessness, said, "Shouldn't we at least wait until someone has talked to –"

"Don't say it, Jane/208," Jane/197 snapped. "Mention the words 'Mother Cave' within earshot of me again, and so help me I'll use this knife on *you*. Let's do something by ourselves for a change, eh?"

"Yes," said Jane/202 viciously. "Shut up about Mother Cave, Jane/208."

Jane/208 flinched as if whipped.

Jane/197 told the other two Parthenai, Jane/201 and Jane/217, to take an arm each. They spread the driffling out flat on her back. Spit and vomit were strung across her facial hair and her eyeballs twitched dementedly in their sockets. Gradually she became aware of what was happening around her, *to her*, but by the time she had fully recovered her wits from Jane/208's two savage blows, Jane/197 was straddling her thighs, Jane/202 was holding down her ankles, and Jane/201 and Jane/217 had her outstretched arms pinned securely beneath their knees.

In the streaks of moonshine that angled in through the chinks in the walls, the razor-sharp whelk-shell blade of Jane/197's knife glinted. Everyone – those inside, those standing outside the doorway looking in, Jane/208, Jane/202, the driffling – was briefly mesmerized by the play of silvery light over the blade's nacreous inner surface.

Then the driffling started to scream. Shudder and scream. Twist, squirm and scream.

"I don't think we should be doing this," said Jane/208.

"Doing what?" said Jane/197. "We're doing nothing more than your precious Mother Cave would do herself, were she capable of making up her mind. We're sending her a signal that we don't have to rely on her any more. A symbolic gesture, you might say. Besides, we won't be harming this poor, diseased creature. We'll be making her better."

Jane/208's misgivings continued to grind away inside her belly, but she understood that there was no way she was going to be able to alter the course of events. She and all the Parthenai would simply have to live with the consequences of Jane/197's actions.

Jane/197 seized the bunch of bulbous tumours, now restored to something like their original dimensions, and wrenched them away from the driffling's pelvis, stretching taut the skin that attached them.

The driffling let out a heart-rending howl and began to buck, her spine arching like a leaping dolphin's back, but the Parthenai were easily able to restrain her. Her eyes were swollen with terror and her face was scarlet and the veins in her temples pulsed fatly.

Jane/197 brought the edge of the blade to the base of the tumours.

"Keep a tight grip on her," she told her accomplices, then added over her shoulder, "Somebody go and fetch a brand from the fire so that we can cauterize the wound."

The driffling's frantic gaze found Jane/208, and hoarsely she begged her to help, please help.

Jane/208 slowly shook her head, as powerless in her own way as the driffling.

Before Jane/197 made the first cut, she glanced at the lump in the driffling's throat, which was working convulsively.

"That will have to go next," she said.

There followed two long, feverish days during which the driffling raged and writhed with the pain of her wounds,

uttering tiny glottal clucks that were unborn screams. An infection set in beneath her bandages, and Jane/208 arranged for her to be taken to Mother Cave for healing.

If Mother Cave was angry that the Parthenai had taken matters into their own hands, she did not show it. She said nothing, and cured the drifting on the steel table with her corroded scalpels and needles.

Shocking as Jane/197's act was, Mother Cave's silence on the subject was even more alarming, and the tribe feared that they had mortally offended her. An atmosphere of dread enveloped the village, and grew so thick and oppressive, so full of averted gazes and nervous mutters, that finally Jane/208, out of frustration more than anything, went up to Mother Cave, sat in the chair and asked her what she was thinking.

What has been done is for the best.

But, Jane/208 insisted, hadn't the Parthenai acted disrespectfully?

A spark of independence is not disrespect. Absolute independence of me is impossible. I am Mother Cave. I am your nurse, your goddess, your keeper. Without me there is no life. Though my daughters have defied me, they will never be free of me. Our relationship has changed, that is all. The children want their mother to know that they have begun to outgrow her. It was inevitable.

So the drifting's arrival had been a bad omen?

All omens are open to interpretation, Jane/208, daughter of Jane/151, grand-daughter of Jane/93. She was an omen of change perhaps. Perhaps not. It makes no difference. A change has occurred, and changes cannot be amended, they can only be endured. The drifting must take her place among the Parthenai. What happens to the tribe now is up to the tribe.

Not up to Mother Cave?

I have done as much as I can.

Jane/208 left Mother Cave far from reassured. It sounded as if, in her secret depths of thought, Mother Cave was sad and troubled. But the news Jane/208 conveyed to her sisters was good news. Mother Cave had forgiven them.

Despite her barbarous appearance and her muteness, the drifting was quickly accepted into the tribe and was assigned chores which she performed well but without a spark of enthusiasm. She was docile and inoffensive, to such a degree that Jane/197 suggested that Mother Cave had done more than heal the drifting's infected wounds and had, in fact, effected some permanent alteration to her brain. Whether this was the case or not, what was indisputably true was that the life seemed to have been drained out of her, and the trauma caused by Jane/197's impromptu operation lingered for a long time in dark purple shadows beneath her eyes.

Around the evening fires the drifting would sit and listen to the stories but would not, because she could not, join in. A shelter was constructed for her with all the usual ceremony and celebration, decorations were donated, and she moved in and, as far as anyone could tell, seemed content. Pained and melancholic, but content.

Though she was not the youngest, they called her Jane/267, because they could think of no other name for her, and everyone did what they could to make her feel welcome, part of the tribe, not least Jane/208, who took

Jane/267 with her whenever she went beachcombing. Jane/267 proved not to be the sharpest-eyed of scavengers, but she made for good company despite (or perhaps because of) her lack of conversation, and as the two of them roved together along the grey, island-girding strip of pebbles between the black cliff and the creamy waves, Jane/208 would sometimes catch Jane/267 gazing out to sea, her phosphorescent green eyes wistful, as though scanning the horizon for something she had lost.

Jane/208 shared that sense of loss, but for different reasons. Already there was talk, fomented by Jane/197, of building some kind of seagoing craft out of dismantled shelters, something like the First Jane's ark, and venturing out in it to discover other islands. Knowledge of how to put such a craft together existed in Mother Cave, and though she would be unwilling to impart it, she would do so if enough Parthenai demanded. Jane/208 herself had no urge to take part in the expedition, but many did, and whether they came home empty-handed or never returned, making the journey at all would destroy the beach-bound simplicity of the Parthenai's lives for ever.

Changes, Mother Cave had said, could not be amended; they could only be endured.

Was that true?

Only Jane/267, who could not speak, knew the answer to that question.

James Lovegrove, born 1965, is the author of the novels *The Hope* (1990) and *Escardy Gap* (1996; with Peter Crowther). He lives near Kew Gardens, Surrey, and the above piece is his third story for us – the first two were "Britworld" (issue 66) and "Giving and Taking" (issue 104); see also the interview with him which appeared in our issue 118.

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The Last Flight of **Captain Bale**

Phil Masters

The morning mist was still an impenetrable blanket over the sea-loch, but on the slopes of the mountain above the sun shone with watery brightness. The Inspector breathed deeply of the Highland air as he dismounted from his carriage, and a small smile played briefly across his lips, but it vanished swift as it had appeared. Today's business was serious business, and Inspector McBryant of the Glasgow Constabulary was a serious man.

He feared that the same might not be true of the fellow he was chiefly here to meet. Walter Jedburgh emerged promptly enough from the hut where he had spent the night, and gave him a firm handshake, but there was an air of cheerful enthusiasm about the man that stood ill, in McBryant's judgement, with the important and moral business of thief-taking. But then, Jedburgh was an American, from a land notorious for its frontier lawlessness.

"You've everything prepared, then?" McBryant asked.

"Ever since last night," answered Jedburgh, with a casual wave towards the hut. "Now, sir, I am in your spotters' hands, and those of fate. And not forgetting Captain Bale, of course."

"Hmmpf." McBryant was a diligent Presbyterian, and would have put the thing a little differently.

"No need to be glum, Inspector," said Jedburgh, "this will all be settled soon enough, for good or ill. Even if Captain Bale lets us down today, we'll catch him eventually."

"Maybe," said McBryant, "but I cannot forget that, if it were not for this scheme, we could have taken up a dozen rogues from the streets of Glasgow..."

"To what real end, sir?" Jedburgh's enthusiasm made him forget his manners, as he interrupted the policeman in mid-speech. "Oh yes, you could have pulled in a few fences and sneaks, but none of 'em were guilty of more than petty stuff, were they, sir? Contrariwise, when this is done, you can bag the lot of 'em. And you'll *know* that they were in cahoots with Bale."

"A jury might ask for more proof," said McBryant. "And for now, they're still about their usual ways."

Jedburgh shook his head ruefully. "Let's net the big fish today, shall we, Inspector? The small fry tomorrow?"

"That must be the way of it. Is there aught more you want? Have you spoken with the sergeants among the spotters?"

"I have, and I have every confidence in them, sir." Even

as Jedburgh spoke, the teams of spotters were ambling into view, from tents behind the ridge of the mountain and carts come up from the nearest village. They did not appear especially disciplined – aside from the mixture of constables from a half-dozen Scottish police forces and artillerymen from three regiments, there were several civilians, ghillies from estates roundabout – but Jedburgh and McBryant both knew that they were as stout and reliable a band of men as the day's work could demand.

"I am pleased to hear it." McBryant moved away to speak with those same sergeants, while Jedburgh turned to attend to his own, unique contribution to the pursuit of Captain Bale.

This was presently housed within the mountainside hut, and Jedburgh had resolved that it should remain there until the moment when it would take flight. No distant spy's telescope would alert Captain Bale to the foe he faced today. Jedburgh's machine had been brought up the Scottish mountain in three cart-loads of wooden packing-cases, and assembled where it now rested. Jedburgh had practised this strategy, and was confident that the machine would function perfectly, even though it had not been tested since it was re-assembled. Of course, a hundred yards of wooden rails had perforce been laid down the slope from the hut's great double doors – but even that task had been left until the very afternoon before this day.

The whole business had nonetheless been more noticeable than Jedburgh entirely liked, but he felt sure that it had been less ostentatious than, say, the assignment of a flotilla of the Royal Navy's new, experimental special escort gunboats could ever have been. This was a trap fit to catch even a wary fox like Captain Bale – and Jedburgh's invention would close that trap.

Jedburgh was applying a little more grease to a set of impeller-shafts when McBryant came to bid him farewell.

"You'll not stay and watch the hunt, sir?" Jedburgh enquired.

McBryant shook his head. "No, Mr Jedburgh. Duty calls. I have reports to write, and officers to supervise, back in Fort William." He looked Jedburgh in the eye, and extended a firm hand to shake. "Well, Mr Jedburgh, this business is all with you, now. And – good luck."

Jedburgh returned the handshake with a rueful smile,

and watched McBryant return to his carriage. Then he turned once more to his machine.

The day was three hours older when a call from one of the spotters caused Jedburgh to turn a spy-glass on the northern end of the sea-loch. There indeed was the bait – a single-funnelled steam-launch, forging through the water with slow efficiency. Jedburgh nodded, though no one was close enough to see; thus far, the plan had proceeded as he, McBryant, and a dozen others had secretly plotted.

The steam-launch was the subject of a dozen rumours, carefully placed in the grimy back-streets and rowdy drinking-dens of Glasgow. Its course had been laid so that Captain Bale – if he acted on those rumours – would surely have to strike here and now. Bale's hide-out was still unknown, but the locations of his past crimes, surveyed on a map, hinted at the limits of his area of operation. But Jedburgh could not, now, deny to himself that all of this was based on a tenuous web of hints and suppositions.

Ten minutes passed. Then came the piercing blast of a police whistle from higher on the mountainside. The spotter responsible swiftly called out a compass bearing, and a dozen voices soon called out, *I have him!*

Jedburgh turned his gaze and then his spy-glass in the direction that he heard called. At first he saw nothing, and then a flickering speck in the sky; then, all in a moment, he found his prey.

A distant silhouette; an oval, pointed at front and stern, with something of a *form* below it. Jedburgh muttered assent, waved to two nearby spotter-constables, and stepped into the hut, casting his spy-glass carelessly onto a work-table.

He moved swiftly to his craft, drawing a box of fat-headed sulphur matches from his pocket as he opened a panel in one side of the machine. One match flared, and a wad of spirit-soaked rags responded to its touch. Jedburgh snapped the panel closed, and drew down an iron lever. A clockwork mechanism awoke, feeding the growing fire with finely-powdered anthracite.

Within seconds, Jedburgh was watching the boiler's simple thermometer rise, and soon, its pressure gauge began to follow. Jedburgh could not restrain a smile; many a more experienced steam engineer had told him that he could never depend upon his engine to react so quickly, and would have had him waste fuel and effort in keeping a preparatory fire burning since daybreak.

He cast off the heavy woollen coat that he had worn in the crisp mountain air, and replaced it with a close-fitting jacket of sheepskin. Next, he donned a leather helmet and a pair of goggles, their lenses made of what he was assured was the strongest glass in the world. Then, he knew, he had no further reason to delay; the boiler was near to its working pressure.

He mounted the machine's broad saddle as the spotter-constables, responding to his earlier signal, finished drawing back the hut's main doors. Then Jedburgh tugged at a release-rope, removing heavy wooden wedges from under his craft, and cast those wedges away.

The wedges had been restraining the wheels of a trolley on which his machine sat. Now, unrestrained, the whole assemblage responded to gravity, and began to roll down the railtrack. As soon as his wings were clear of the door-frame, Jedburgh pushed one last lever into place, and twisted a valve to increase the flow of anthracite to the firebox.

With a preliminary hiss, and a creaking of mechanisms, the steam engine began supplying motive force to forged

steel connecting rods. With that, the ornithopter's wings began to beat, slow and ponderous at first, but soon vigorous and swift. The trolley gathered speed down the rails, creaking in what seemed to Jedburgh like gratitude as the ornithopter gained lift and relieved it of its load.

The end of the hundred yards came at a point where the slope of the mountain twisted into a precipitous drop of ten or fifteen feet. The trolley plunged down there, and shattered among the heather – but the ornithopter carried on, wings beating ever harder as they drew it up into the pale blue summer sky.

Now Jedburgh could turn his attention once again to his particular task. For a moment, he could not see the dirigible which was his prey, but a glance at his compass, and a recollection of the bearing which the spotters had called, soon set his gaze right. Captain Bale was coming on yet, his own eyes no doubt fixed upon the steam-launch.

Jedburgh twisted the valve a little more, more anthracite entered his fire-box, and the boiler grew hotter. Now, with all mechanisms engaged, the ensuing increase in pressure could find release; the ornithopter's wings beat ever harder. Jedburgh adjusted a lever to furl them a little, so that he gained barely any more height, but considerable speed – and at the same time, he turned his steering-bar, and set the prow of his craft towards the dirigible.

A bare minute later, as he drew closer to his prey, Jedburgh was able to discern that the dirigible's side was embellished with a great flag – a diagonal blue cross, bespangled with white stars and rimmed with white, on a red ground.

Jedburgh smiled thinly. He had contemplated decorating the ornithopter with the stars and stripes, but he had abandoned that idea. Today, he flew for justice, and for the Glasgow Constabulary. (Albeit that a discreet word had reached him from the United States embassy in London, that his actions were viewed with gratitude, as reducing an embarrassment.)

And thus it was that the crew of the pirate dirigible saw their challenger come upon them; a skeletal structure of wood and iron, with wings of heavy canvas, trailing a thin line of steam and smoke. Doubtless, they instantly recognized the ornithopter for the threat it was, but they could only be slow to respond. Their own craft was largely at the mercy of the winds. Despite its own powerful steam engine, and the huge rudder and other mechanisms with which it was equipped, it was a clumsy thing compared to its new opponent.

Jedburgh knew that he could set the terms for this encounter. "Something you're not used to, I think, Captain," he murmured. But at that moment, he saw a flickering spark appear upon the dirigible's gondola, and he impulsively shifted the steering-bar aside.

Then, even as the ornithopter responded with a swift turn, he told himself that his caution was unwarranted. Clearly, Captain Bale was carrying a Gatling gun as well as the brutal array of shrapnel-bombs with which he had terrorized and butchered his victims on land and sea. Well, that made him somewhat more of a danger to the ornithopter, but Jedburgh had studied weapons, and their applications in such exotic circumstances. He knew how inaccurate the rapid-firing Gatling was, and he judged that he could remain at a distance at which its bullets could never hope to strike him. His own weapons, he was sure, were less constrained.

Jedburgh simply completed the turn into which his first response had forced his craft, so that the dirigible was once more ahead of his prow. There was a sight placed among his array of control levers and valve-toggles – a simple but precise assemblage of wire and wrought iron, marked with a few numbers in white enamel paint. Now, he squinted at it with care, and at Captain Bale's craft with predatory concentration.

Holding the ornithopter's steering-bar steady with his left hand, Jedburgh reached under the saddle with his right, and found the bank of knife-switches, each linked to the single, heavy, lead-acid battery mounted in the fuselage behind him. A tight smile crossed his lips as he drew the ornithopter about a little more, and aligned its gunnery sight with the dirigible's decorated bulk.

"Now, Captain Bale," he murmured, "Let us consider the art of modern warfare."

Jedburgh snapped the first knife-switch closed. In a bank of metal tubes mounted under the ornithopter's prow, an electric spark flared briefly, igniting a charge; with a sharp hiss, the rocket leapt forward from its launching-tube. For a moment, Jedburgh was blinded by the cloud of acrid smoke that billowed around the ornithopter, but the craft immediately broke out of that, enabling its pilot to watch the bright flare of the rocket rush and twist through the air ahead of him.

The launching-tubes were angled slightly upwards, to grant the rockets the greatest possible range; Jedburgh watched the flame describe a curved path towards the dirigible, before it fell well short of its target.

Jedburgh whistled under his breath, a single note; for all his careful self-training, he had misjudged the range, and been too optimistic in his hopes for the rocket's power. There was no need for him to repeat the error, and the battle was not yet done; however, he was unhappy at the lapse. Walter Jedburgh was a man who forgave error in others more swiftly than he forgave it in himself.

The flickering of his opponent's Gatling-gun reminded him of the reason for his cautious use of distance. He turned the ornithopter about as he pondered somewhat of tactics.

He decided on a sequence of experiments. Firstly, he drew back on the control-bar, and the ornithopter began to climb, higher than his target. For a moment, Jedburgh felt confident, and reached for the small rack of phosphor bombs at his side. Each had attached to it three small, barbed grapples. Dropped on the dirigible, they could be expected to cling on like burrs before detonating.

But that theory was not to be tested. The dirigible could not manoeuvre, but it could shed ballast, and climb vigorously. At the sight of Jedburgh's own action, its pilot made it act so. For a long minute, Jedburgh made his craft's steam engine labour and its wings thrash, but in half that time, he had recognized defeat.

There were few other options. Jedburgh twisted the control-bar, sending the ornithopter on a circular path around the dirigible, occasionally driving his craft closer as he carefully watched the flickering spark of the Gatling's response. Within a single minute he was reasonably certain that the gun could not bear directly aft.

And so, that was where he placed himself, before turning to close directly on his target. One hand held the steering-bar steady as the other grasped the second knife-switch. However, Captain Bale had a response. Although the

lighter-than-air craft had none of the ornithopter's agility, it had its own motive power, and could be steered. As Jedburgh closed, his target lurched and shifted before him. Jedburgh gritted his teeth and struggled to hold the sight steady on the gas-bag.

Coming as close as he dared to his prey, he closed the knife-switch with a firm pressure. Again, the rocket sprang up and forward, and at precisely that moment, with a burst of steam-power and a shift in its rudder, the dirigible slipped sideways. The rocket missed by the narrowest of margins, before plummeting down towards the Atlantic waves, its path marked by smoke.

Jedburgh pulled the ornithopter aside by main force, and was hundreds of yards from the dirigible before he could begin to ponder. Then, he contemplated the nearness of that miss. Had he made some error of judgment, which he could discipline himself to avoid during future attempts? He was unsure.

"Ah, well," said Jedburgh to himself, and twisted the steering-bar, so that the ornithopter turned yet further away from the dirigible. Then he adjusted two valve-controls. The first was that which controlled the speed at which pulverized anthracite was fed into the ornithopter's fire-box; the second increased the driver-piston's all-important steam pressure. Within a second, the ornithopter's wings were beating more strongly, dragging the craft swiftly through the air; a touch at other controls changed the angle of the lifting surfaces and of the tail, and the ornithopter began a slow, steady climb.

Jedburgh set his controls so that the climb took the form of an upward spiral, and set himself to watching Captain Bale's craft. The sky-pirate had evidently abandoned his intent to strike at the steam-launch; however brash his confidence, he had no doubt guessed that the rumour of valuable government bonds in transit was no more than bait. However, the fight, dictated by the dirigible's speed, had not yet carried its protagonists as far as the first island in the mouth of the sea-loch.

Jedburgh looked at the barometer which gave him an assessment of his altitude. He was now flying as high as he had ever taken the ornithopter in the past; according to the savants he had consulted, Captain Bale's dirigible was capable of little more. Both craft could climb only slowly under these conditions.

Although he could not surpass the dirigible, Jedburgh somehow felt that he held the high ground.

"And, Captain Bale," he murmured softly, "the high ground is always and forever the very acme of tactical advantage."

He pushed a control lever forward, and began a dive. The dirigible could not react to this action with much haste, even if its crew saw reason. For a moment, Jedburgh smiled, feeling as he believed a sparrow-hawk might feel as it swooped upon a fat and foolish duck.

Then, he hauled back on the bar. The ornithopter had purchased *velocity* with its plunge; it retained somewhat of that speed even as it climbed. Jedburgh released an involuntary cry of joy as he sped at the dirigible like an arrow from Hercules' bow, too swift for the Gatling-gunner to hold sights on him.

But then, Jedburgh occupied himself with his own rocket-sights. He had tested and calibrated these for all manner of conditions; a glance at an adjacent spirit-level told him his angle of flight, and he once again applied his well-trained judgment of distance. Then he aligned a mark

on the sights with his prey, and snapped two of the knife-switches closed at once.

The ornithopter bucked from the back-blast of the two rockets, then twisted into another dive at an even steeper angle, plunging close past the dirigible a bare second after the rockets found their mark. Jedburgh could not restrain a cry of triumph as a scarlet flames bloomed across the gas-bag. At that same moment, he heard an abrupt report from behind him on the ornithopter's hull. A moment later, as it seemed to him, the main control lever flinched in his grasp.

Jedburgh looked aft of his saddle, and saw ripped fabric, and a lesser control-cable flying free. One bullet from the Gatling gun had found its mark.

Looking forward again, he realized that the ornithopter had now dived to within a bare hundred feet or so of the grey sea. He snatched at the lever which feathered the wings, then, forcing himself to act with smooth caution, he drew back on the steering-bar.

For a moment, Jedburgh believed that all was well, as the horizon fell below the ornithopter's prow. He twisted the steam-feed control valve, and his engine hummed smoothly in response; the wings beat strongly, pulling the craft higher in the air.

Then the bar in Jedburgh's hand twitched once again, and he heard the almost musical sound of a control cable giving way somewhere at his back. The ornithopter twisted in the air, its stability deteriorating by the moment.

Jedburgh looked down, and saw the decoy-ship to his left. With immeasurable care, he drew on the controls to bring his craft around, and wound the engine power down until the wings were barely beating. Then he leant far forward, and dragged at the mechanism which disengaged the wing-motion shafts.

The ornithopter was now a simple glider, and Jedburgh was able to concentrate on the problem of identifying which among its controls were no longer effective. The stabilizer tail-structure was clearly severely damaged, but it had at least become jammed in a relatively neutral configuration. As Jedburgh's success in executing a slow turn proved, the rudder was not destroyed, and the wing-feathering mechanism was entirely undamaged. However, something in the motion of the hull told Jedburgh that the bullet had damaged structural members as well as linkage cables.

The ornithopter was a dozen feet above the water when the stress of even a gliding flight finally told. The prow leapt up, then slammed down just as the craft plunged into the sea. Most of the aft structure tore away at the moment of impact, and the boiler gave a great steam-kettle hiss as the salt water dowsed it. Jedburgh pushed himself away from the saddle, then snatched at part of the wing, whose light, strong structure proved, as he had hoped, able to float.

Jedburgh gasped as the excitement of the moment of crisis left him, and it came home to him how bitterly cold the northern Atlantic could be. But then he heard a hail. Looking round, he saw the decoy ship draw up close to hand.

A burly seaman hurled a life-belt, and Jedburgh struck out across the few feet to reach it. As soon as they were sure of the security of Jedburgh's grasp on the ring, the ship's crew began to draw on its rope, and Jedburgh was dragged through the water.

Strong hands lifted him the last part of the way, a coarse blanket was thrown around his shoulders, and a mug of

what proved to be rum-spiked tea was thrust into his hands.

This he found an embarrassing encumbrance when an upright figure in naval blue approached him. Jedburgh had been introduced to Lieutenant Hatfield, a Royal Navy man, in the days of preparation for his mission.

"Are you well, Mr Jedburgh?" Hatfield enquired.

"Well enough, lieutenant." Jedburgh was careful to use the British pronunciation of the rank. "My thanks, sir."

Hatfield's formal reserve broke with a broad smile, and for the first time, Jedburgh realized how young the man was. "It's you that's earned thanks, Mr Jedburgh," said the navy man. "That was dashed fine shooting. Good work."

Jedburgh smiled back. "I got him in the end," he muttered.

"Good work" repeated Hatfield. "And speaking of which..." He looked over his shoulder, to the bow of the ship, and Jedburgh saw their next objective.

Captain Bale's dirigible had plummeted to the sea, and fragments of the structure floated a quarter of a mile away, still burning intermittently. But its crew had survived; two silk parachutes lay on the surface of the water, and two figures were treading water, waving at the ship.

"You're picking them up?" asked Jedburgh, feeling foolish for the question even as he spoke.

"Of course." Hatfield and his crew shrugged the question off, and turned to the task. Jedburgh reflected that the seamen might easily have taken a more brutal view; bare minutes earlier, they had faced the possibility of explosive death from Bale's vicious, plummeting bombs. Their vessel carried a small anti-dirigible mortar, on the new design being hurriedly pressed into service on land and sea throughout the world, but Captain Bale had proved his ability to strike accurately from above the range of such weapons; the crew had been terribly vulnerable. But like other truly professional warriors to whom Jedburgh had spoken, they clearly abandoned all feelings of malice or vengeance when the battle was done.

Jedburgh moved forward to watch the rescue, taking care not to obstruct the task as he sipped at the mug. He was curious to see his recent antagonist.

The first man out of the water was, Jedburgh guessed, the gunner; a short, swarthy fellow in Confederate grey, who proved taciturn and sullen in the face of a pair of reciprocators trained on him by sailors of the crew. He stood aside, with arms by his side and fists slightly clenched, as the second figure emerged from the brine.

Captain Bale barely accepted any assistance from the Royal Navy men as he climbed aboard their craft, and stepped over the rail with a grace that belied his appearance. Even clad in wet mechanic's overalls, visibly shivering in the cold, and faced with a half-dozen captors, the one-time Darling of the South, later Avenger of Dixie, and latterly Terror of the Isles, cut a dashing figure.

He was no taller than several of the sailors, and yet his bearing made him seem to tower over the men who stepped forward to search him for weapons. His brown eyes and handsome face matched the accounts in numerous romantic prints and Confederate broadsheets, and even his neat military moustache had survived his recent immersion.

Dash it, thought Jedburgh, the fellow could have been made to play the melodrama hero. Was he born, or sculpted, or dreamed up?

But Bale was human enough; his air of *sang froid* might

not falter before the muzzles of the guns that were held on him while he submitted to a personal search, but Jedburgh saw him shiver a moment in the Scottish breeze, and saw uncertainty drifting into his expression. Then Lieutenant Hatfield stepped forward and spoke.

"Captain Thierry Bale, I charge you with Murder, with Piracy on the High Seas, and with Armed Robbery."

Bale shook his head, but even he could find no words to deny the accusations. Evidently, his far-famed, defiant pride had been worn away in the course of his transformation, from a soldier who would not surrender, first to a wild buccaneer striking against his former enemies, and then to a murderous brigand assaulting defenceless folk who had no part in his lost war.

Then his glance took in Jedburgh, and some flame burned in his eyes once more. He took three paces down the deck.

"Sir," he said, "I take it that you were the operator of that bird-machine which brought me down?"

The deduction, while swift, could hardly have been difficult, given Jedburgh's garb and situation. Jedburgh nodded. "Yes, Captain Bale," he answered.

"I am impressed by your machine, sir," said Bale, "and by your courage. Few such craft have seen combat before now."

Jedburgh said nothing.

"You are American, sir, from your accent?" Bale asked, and Jedburgh nodded again. "Tell me then, sir," the air-pirate continued, "what motivated you to oppose me? Did my aerial cavaliers rout your regiment in the War Between the States? Did some member of your family suffer in my missions of retaliation against Boston or New York? Have you lost friends or property to my recent actions?"

To each of these questions, Jedburgh shook his head. Bale was left gazing at him, speechless.

"No sir," said Jedburgh. "You were a menace to the peace of this nation, and to the good name of our own..."

"Your own nation, sir," Bale snapped.

Jedburgh shrugged; with Bale now taken, and doomed to the mercies of the British courts, he found that he felt little interest in debating ideals with the man. "As you please. You had to be stopped, and I had the means to accomplish that."

Bale continued to stare. "I do not believe I understand you, sir," he said softly.

Jedburgh shrugged again. "That is not my concern, Captain Bale." He turned away, leaving Bale to the attentions of the crewmen, and spoke to Hatfield. "Where are we bound now, then, lieutenant? Fort William?"

Hatfield smiled again. "No, Mr Jedburgh," he answered. "We have coal enough, and the day is before us. I shall hand these rogues over to the Glasgow police, as I am ordered – and that, I think, means that we should set course for Glasgow."

Jedburgh found himself returning the smile. "Where else indeed, lieutenant. To Glasgow!" And with that, he turned to the prow of the ship, and looked forward to another visit to the proud, futuristic town of steel ships and busy, smoky mills.

Phil Masters, born 1959, has appeared in *Interzone* just once before, with the unusual Atlantis story "Platonic Solid" (issue 108). A few of his stories have also appeared in small-press magazines. He lives in Baldock, Hertfordshire.

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Farewell to Sam

Sam Moskowitz, 30 June 1920-15 April 1997

Sam Moskowitz died of complications following a heart attack on 15th April 1997. He was 76 years old.

It is likely that many general readers of science fiction, who read it for enjoyment and aren't too worried about the history and development of the field, won't know the name Sam Moskowitz, or may have heard it vaguely bandied about. But those of us who are die-hard science-fiction nutters who care madly about the field and want to know everything about it, owe Sam Moskowitz a huge debt. Not all of us are prepared to admit it. For many years SaM, as he was often referred to in fan magazines, had a running battle with science-fiction academia about the way he presented his research results, and how he was precious about his sources, declining to share data on which he had spent thousands of dollars. They challenged that his work contained errors, though they themselves failed to come up with alternative data. But in the end they had to admit that Sam Moskowitz was the first and foremost historian of science fiction and without him there is much that we would not know about the field, and much that we might never have known, because all too few were prepared to spend the time and develop the expertise to piece everything together. In 1981 the Science Fiction Research Association presented Moskowitz with the Pilgrim Award for his distinguished contributions to the study of science fiction.

Sam has written extensively about other sf writers, but not too much has been written about him, not in the professional magazines at any rate. On the sad occasion of his death it is the least we can do to remember the man's massive contribution to science-fiction research. The following appreciation is also personally biased. Sam's work influenced me very early in my life when I came across his anthologies *Exploring Other Worlds* and *The Coming of the Robots* in 1963 and read the articles in *Fantastic* and *Amazing Stories* which were later collected together in his groundbreaking books *Explorers of the Infinite* and *Seekers of Tomorrow*. For the then-impressionable neophyte that I was, Sam's research opened the world of science fiction. It put everything that I was reading into perspective. He gave it a history so that I could understand the signifi-



An appreciation by Mike Ashley

cance of what I was reading and gain further enjoyment from being able to explore the development of an author's work or a theme in science fiction. It was directly due to this inspiration that I turned to science-fiction research and began producing articles for the fan magazines in 1965. Most of those early articles are embarrassingly crass and betray my then shallow knowledge of the field, but Sam's work drove me on to complete my knowledge and fill in those gaps. I have Sam to thank (and my wife has Sam to blame) for the fact that our house now bulges to the rafters with over 16,000 books and magazines devoted to my study of the history of science fiction, fantasy and weird fiction. I could never master or better the work done by Moskowitz, and he was often the first to write to me to draw attention to an error in anything I'd produced, though he did it tactfully. But he was also amongst the first to praise. It was one of the highlights of my writing career when I received a rapturous letter from Sam exulting about my *Bio-Bibliography*

of *Algernon Blackwood* for which he also wrote a rave review for *Fantasy Commentator*, and he was equally praiseworthy of the work I did with Marshall Tymn on *Science Fiction, Fantasy and Weird Fiction Magazines*. Those books and many others that I have written would not have come into existence (not from my typewriter anyway) had it not been for the inspiration I received from Sam Moskowitz. I suspect there are many others out there similarly inspired.

Sam seems to have been part of science fiction for so long that it's easy to believe he was there from the very start, but in fact he was only five when the first science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, appeared dated April 1926. He didn't see his first sf magazine until the February 1932 issue of *Astounding Stories* but in those Depression years neither Sam nor his parents had the money for such fripperies. Sam's father had gone bankrupt in the Wall Street Crash and was forced to sell fruit and vegetables from a street barrow until he regained enough finances to open a candy store, where Sam used to help. He began to borrow sf magazines from his school mates until he could start to afford to buy them himself second-hand. From 1934 he began to amass what would become one of the largest sf collections in the world.

Sam joined the Science Fiction League established by Hugo Gernsback at *Wonder Stories* and through that entered organized fandom. He began to acquire the early fan magazines that were starting to appear and before long was contributing to them. His first published piece was "A Complete List of All the Serials Ever Printed in *Air Wonder*, *Science Wonder*, and *Wonder Stories*" which was published in *The Science Fiction Collector* for 14th February 1937. I have to confess I winced a little when I first learned of this, because back in around 1969 or so, I also published a complete checklist of all sf magazine serials in my own fan magazine at the time. I hadn't realized I was unwittingly following in Sam's footsteps.

Soon after this Sam produced his own fan magazine, *Helios*, which he took over after the first issue from fellow fan Alex Osheroff. Under Sam's guiding hand it ran for six issues from July 1937 to May 1938 and included many contributions from leading professionals of the day. It would be

impossible to cover here the many contributions Sam made to the fan magazines, which run into hundreds, probably thousands of articles and pieces of journalism. He remained active in fandom for 60 years, from 1936 to his death. His letters and articles continued to appear in the fan magazines and he continued to collect all of the major publications. It was as likely to be Sam's fan roots as much as anything else which was the barrier between Sam and the academic world. He had no formal college training and was self-taught, which gave him a rather rough but perfectly readable writing style. Sam was widely read, not just in science fiction, and could write passably well, but he was never academically trained (though he did attend a short creative writing course after he'd left school) and his inability to conform to academic requirements would frustrate the college professors. This frustration was doubled by the fact that Sam was the first to develop a college science-fiction course which he ran at the City College of New York from 1953 to 1955.

We cannot leave Sam's primary fan activities, though, without recording two major achievements.

Firstly he was the primary organizer behind the first World Science Fiction Convention, held in New York in 1939. That began a tradition which continues to this day. Also Sam was the first to think it worthwhile to write a history of the science-fiction fan movement up to the outbreak of the Second World War. He called it *The Immortal Storm* and after it was serialized in the fan magazine *Fantasy Commentator* from 1945 on, it was given hard-cover publication by the Atlanta Science Fiction Organization Press in 1954. If ever there was an anorakophilic approach to the minutiae of science fiction this was it and, I have to confess, I enjoyed every detail of it. Science-fiction fandom is something most of us can associate with, even if it's just our own delight in talking about science fiction with fellow devotees. Not long before he died Sam was updating *The Immortal Storm*, tracing the development of science fiction fandom after 1941.

Moskowitz did turn a hand to writing short fiction. He hasn't produced much — his heart is in the thrill of the chase in unearthing forgotten

facts and he evidently prefers the pleasure of reading other writers' work rather than creating his own. Nevertheless his stories are worth reading for their period appeal. "The Way Back" (*Comet*, January 1941) was his first appearance. It's always struck me as a story about Sam's coming of age. It's about a physically powerful man (Sam was a good pugilist and used to defend his school pals against the local bullies) who is an outcast from society and becomes a loner in space until he discovers a society in which he fits. The story proved popular and on the strength of it Sam produced several more but only two appeared in print at the time: "World of Mockery" (*Planet Stories*, Summer 1941), a story which is clearly inspired by Stanley G. Weinbaum's work, and "Man of the Stars" (*Planet Stories*, Winter 1941-42) another story about a physical strongman who sacrifices himself to save others. Sam published a few other stories in the 1950s, including "Death of a Dinosaur" (*Amazing Stories*, April 1956), "Sitting Duck" (*Amazing Stories*, October 1956) and "The Golden Pyramid" (*Fantastic Universe*, November 1956). The last

shows the continuing influence of Weinbaum, an author whose works Moskowitz rated (quite rightly) highly. Sam has written about Weinbaum at length on more than one occasion. He was the subject of what was technically Sam's first "book," *After Ten Years*, which was a collection of tributes to Weinbaum assembled by Sam and published by Gerry de la Ree in 1945. He later edited a selection of Weinbaum's best fiction, *A*

Martian Odyssey and Other Stories (Lancer, 1962).

This was really the route that Sam's life subsequently took. Although before the War he had spent a short time as a literary agent in partnership with James Taurasi, he found it easier to hold down a full-time job with a regular wage. Briefly, in 1953, Sam edited *Science-Fiction Plus* for Hugo Gernsback. This magazine was not a success, but I don't think that was particularly Sam's fault. He followed the dictates of his publisher, and Gernsback was intent upon producing a magazine similar to his former *Wonder Stories*, but now spruced up to look like a modern slick magazine. It was really mutton-

dressed-as-lamb and was no rival for the leading magazines of the day, particularly *Astounding SF* and *Galaxy*. What's more, *Science-Fiction Plus* appeared at the time of the science-fiction boom when there were scores of magazines on the stalls and the start of a burgeoning paperback market. The magazine last for seven issues. It isn't really remembered for anything these days, despite being called sf's first slick magazine, although tucked away in its sixth issue was Anne McCaffrey's first appearance, and there were some good stories by Clifford Simak, Eric Frank Russell and Philip José Farmer. The experience gained from this enabled Sam to become the editor of trade magazines in the frozen-foods business. This gave him sufficient salary to indulge in extending his collection beyond the genre publications into other popular magazines, pulps and books, and he would mine these for his articles, collections and anthologies.

His first book along these lines was *Life Everlasting and Other Tales of Science, Fantasy and Horror*, issued in 1947. It brought together some of the best stories by David H. Keller, who was rapidly becoming the forgotten man of science fiction. Keller helped finance the project for which Moskowitz teamed up with old friend Will Sykora and formed the Avalon Publishing Company. The project ended up something of a commercial failure, but the book itself is fine and set the trend for what we would later expect from Sam: a lengthy, informative introduction crammed with obscure and fascinating facts, followed by a good representative selection of stories. You can never help but be informed by Sam's essays, even if you try not to be. He unfailingly produces facts and figures that are in danger of suffocating you, and you have to ration your reading of his material for fear of disappearing under it. Much of this is due to Sam writing in his own defence, particularly after people accused him of poor research. He began to go to great lengths to elaborate on his sources, often in the minutest and most laborious detail, and would challenge anyone to refute this in print. His later writings often became twice the length they needed to be and took on the feel of a battlefield, or at best a chess game, with Sam's plot and counterplot carefully staged.

The other attribute noticeable in Sam's work was the principle of infinite inspiration. In other words no one was capable of creating an idea of their own — there would always be some obscure story that few people knew about yet which Sam felt sure had a part to play in the history of literature.

These aspects of Sam's writing could be irritating but were also fun.

A searching look at the curious and lively minds — the famous and the forgotten — who shaped the development of science fiction from its earliest beginnings in the 17th century to its modern flowering in the 1930s

Explorers of the Infinite Shapers of Science Fiction

By Sam Moskowitz



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They derived from Sam's tremendous passion for the development of science fiction and he loved to make the jigsaw fit. Even if the pieces came from a hundred different puzzles, Sam would bludgeon them together and then challenge you to prove otherwise.

This is what started to happen with Sam's ground-breaking books *Explorers of the Infinite* and *Seekers of Tomorrow*. These were a series of essays, most of which had appeared in the magazines during the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which Sam traced through the history of science fiction from the earliest key writers up to the 1950s, basing each stage on a representative writer. These books were accompanied by two anthologies reprinting selected fiction to support his case: *Masterpieces of Science Fiction* and *Modern Masterpieces of Science Fiction*. When these books were reviewed, Sam's facts and assumptions were challenged by a number of the leading critics and reviewers in the field, starting with P. Schuyler Miller in *Analog*, and others, not least James Blish, Damon Knight and Algis Budrys, also tested Sam's work. Sam reacted violently. The letter columns of both the professional and fan magazines were full of Sam's rebuttals and often quite entertaining brickbats were cast back and forth. I remember thoroughly enjoying the arguments in *Analog* between Sam and Sky Miller, both of whom I highly respected. I remember feeling at the end of it that Sam proved himself from the point of view of facts, but had done it in such a belligerent way that he harmed his case. That battlefield confrontation has remained ever since, with some reviewers delighting in attacking Sam, not always for good reason, but perhaps just to bait him. It became a little like watching John McEnroe arguing with the umpire at Wimbledon — fun to begin with but rapidly becoming tiresome. Sam did not really need to defend his case. His books stand testament to the immense amount of research that he undertook, discovering facts about the history of science fiction, fantasy and weird fiction that no one had previously known, but which the field was happy to plunder. Sam's work has been the bedrock of many subsequent science-fiction reference books. I know I used his work extensively when I was working on my *History of the Science Fiction Magazines* which was blatantly modelled on two of Sam's major research anthologies: *Science Fiction by Gaslight* (World, 1968) which looked at sf in the popular magazines from 1891 to 1911, and *Under the Moons of Mars* (Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1970) which continued this history through the American pulp magazines from 1912 to 1920. I know that many others have used Sam's work as well, and I

believe this copious use of Sam's published work is the real testament to his achievements. With the possible exception of E. F. Bleiler, I know of no other researcher in the science-fiction field who has unearthed so much new material and been able to shape it within the context of the history of science fiction. If Sam had any failing it was his tendency to get the sf field out of perspective and not recognize many of the influencing and shaping factors that were going on outside sf in mainstream literature but which were in turn dictating trends.

Apart from his ground-breaking work Sam occasionally produced anthologies. Sometimes these were to help out colleagues: he ghost-edited a number of anthologies for Leo Margulies and Alden H. Norton as well as openly collaborating with them and Roger Elwood. All of Sam's anthologies are a gold-mine of rare material, though he would occasionally irritate some authors, such as C. L. Moore and Ray Bradbury, by reprinting material from fan magazines which the authors had not wanted reprinted. Nevertheless from the readers' point of view this material is fascinating. I really loved the series of supernatural fiction

anthologies that Sam produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *Horror Times Ten*, *Masters of Horror*, *Hauntings and Horrors*, *Ghostly by Gaslight*, *Horrors Unknown* and *Horrors in Hiding* are still among some of the most interesting anthologies edited. Sam also produced a quite remarkable volume in *The Man Who Called Himself Poe* (Doubleday, 1969) where he brought together rare material by, about or featuring Edgar Allan Poe. It's one of the more ingenious concept anthologies I've seen.

Sam's greatest achievement in his research was the unearthing of the works of Edward Page Mitchell and Robert Duncan Milne, which he collected in *The Crystal Man* (Doubleday, 1973) and *Science Fiction in Old San Francisco* (Grant, 1980) respectively. These two books traced the undercurrent of science fiction in the United States from the days of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne through to the development of the pulp magazines. Sam also did a painstakingly thorough job in presenting the biography and publishing history of William Hope Hodgson in

three fastidious volumes, *Out of the Storm* (Grant, 1975), *The Haunted Pampero* (Grant, 1991) and *Terrors of the Sea* (Grant, 1996). Sam came to legal blows with at least one other researcher over his Hodgson research and access to papers, something which would have been unheard of 30 or 40 years ago but in the present day, where access to rare material can be prohibitively expensive and copyright protection is paramount, it is all too unfortunate a risk. Sam's inevitable desire to lead with his chin meant that much time was wasted in legal disputes when it could have been spent on further research.

Sam had wide fields of interest. In addition to the above authors he presented biographical collections of

Olaf Stapledon in *Far Future Calling* (Train, 1979) and Abraham Merritt in *Reflections in the Moon Pool* (Train, 1985); he's written an extensive study of the publishing history of Bernarr Macfadden for *Fantasy Commentator* and has an as yet unpublished full-length study of Hugo Gernsback. Also unpublished is Sam's second volume of *Science Fiction in Old San Francisco* which contains much new material on Ambrose Bierce, Jack London, George Sterling and others. I

hope that these and other works on which Sam so assiduously worked will eventually see the light of day.

There is no doubt that the understanding of the development of the science-fiction field would be considerably poorer without the pioneering work of Sam Moskowitz, and it is unlikely that much of the reference material available today would be as complete as it is had not the second- and third-generation writers had Sam's base of published work to draw upon. In fact it's as much due to Sam's example as anyone's that research in science fiction has grown into such an industry. You're either influenced by him, or you undertake work to challenge his own findings. Either way the sf field has benefited. His passing is a tremendous loss, because there are all too few people with his depth of knowledge and understanding of the field who are capable of taking the next steps. I'll miss him tremendously, but his legacy is here for us all to share. Thank you, Sam.

Mike Ashley



ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

Gorblimey: this is the 60th "Ansible Link" column, representing five whole years of unreliable reportage. Let me cast aside modesty and gloat ... on, for example, another three Hugo nominations (I admit I've won far too many in the fan categories, but am still being urged not to withdraw, since rival candidates would prefer to trounce me in an open vote rather than be "Best Except For Langford") and my first ever selection for a best-of-year sf anthology, with "The Spear of the Sun" from *IZ* 112 scheduled to appear in David Hartwell's subtly titled *Year's Best SF*. Whoopee! Normal self-deprecation will now be resumed until, let's say, 2002.

MANTRA, TANTRA AND SPECKLEBANG

Brian Aldiss deploys mighty knowledge of the Caps Lock key to chide me for neglecting his own multimedia performance at the 1997 Eastercon: "IT'S ALL VERY WELL TO SAY THAT ALDISS WAS ALDISS. ALDISS WAS ALSO CALIBAN AND PHILIP K. DICK. BUT YOU BUGGERS WHO STICK IN THE BAR ALL THE TIME DON'T SEE THE HARD WORK WE PUT IN TO THE JOB..."

Kenneth Bulmer, long-time British writer, *New Writings* editor and fan, had a stroke just before Easter and lay semi-conscious in his flat for two days before being found; later he was said to be doing fairly well in hospital.

Neil Gaiman was presented in March with a GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Award for "positive portrayals of Gay and Lesbian characters" in *Sandman*. "It's the only time I've ever had a room of people cheer the correct pronunciation of my name – all of them undoubtedly convinced it was some kind of political statement."

Liz Holliday is editing a new fiction-oriented British sf/fantasy mag-

azine called *Odyssey*, to be published by Caliver Press: "We want to put together an issue 0 for midsummer, followed (all being well) by issue 1 at World Fantasy Con." Guidelines/rates: SAE to 31 Shottsford, Wessex Gardens, London, W2 5LG.

Stephen Jones gloats chthonically that his Lovecraftian anthology *Shadows Over Innsmouth* has been selected by the University of Massachusetts Lowell as a textbook for courses on the evolution of the British horror story.

Sam Moskowitz (1920-1987), a fan since 1936 and one of sf's most erudite if controversial historians and critics, suffered a devastating heart attack on 7 April, and – after a period of coma in intensive care – died on the 15th. Mike Ashley has written a longer obituary for *Interzone*, to which "SaM" was a keen subscriber.

Terry Pratchett has rather regretfully left Gollancz for Corgi/Transworld; *Jingo!* will be his last VG hardback. "It was a sad if inevitable parting, not a bust up. I'd been with them since Gollancz were owned by Gollancz, after all. [...] Corgi are much more recognizably an international company with more muscle and that's what I need right now." Corgi were also his first major publishers, bringing out mass-market paperbacks of the first two Discworld novels before Gollancz took over the hardbacks. Sic transit....

Tomoyuki Tanaka (1910-1997), Japanese producer of over 200 films since 1944 and creator of *Godzilla* (1954), plus its many sequels and some fine historical movies, died in Tokyo on 2 April.

Colin Wilson enthusiastically reviewed the *Fantasy Encyclopedia* (for *Literary Review*) and thought the H. P. Lovecraft entry particularly nifty; he then discovered it had been written years ago by himself. Overcome with excitement, the noted writer on Tolkien proceeded to credit Tolkien's coinage EUCATASTROPHE to someone called John Clute....

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Hugo Award nominations for 1997 were announced in late April. The most voted-on category was Best Novel (356 ballots), with finalists *Blue Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *Holy Fire* by Bruce Sterling, *Memory* by Lois McMaster Bujold, *Remnant Population* by Elizabeth Moon, and *Starplex* by Robert J. Sawyer. Next in popularity was Dramatic Presentation (283): *Independence Day*, *Mars Attacks!*, *Babylon 5* "Severed Dreams", *Star Trek: First Contact*, and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* "Trials and Tribble-ations". (The *Babylon 5* episodes "War without End" and

"Z'Ha'Dum" received enough votes to be nominated, but J. M. Straczynski strategically declined.) Most dominated by the British Empire: Nonfiction (163), featuring *The Faces of Fantasy* by Patti Perret, *Look at the Evidence* by John Clute, *The Silence of the Langford* by Dave Langford, *Time & Chance* by L. Sprague de Camp, and *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* by Diana Wynne Jones. It was also nice to see James White's "Un-Birthday Boy" listed for Short Story and *Interzone* for Semiprozine. Howls of boredom greeted the appearance, in the fanzine and fan-writer categories, of *Ansible* and me.

End of Infinity. The latest exciting news of the ailing *Infinity* media-sf magazine is that certain creditors (advertisers, suppliers and contributors) have been told that should they take legal action rather than accept a payoff of a measly few pence in the pound, the holding company – an off-the-shelf job with liabilities limited to £50 – will be wound up and no one will get anything.

Fantasy Empire Falls? TSR, financially strapped and owing vast royalties to Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman *et al*, are now being bought up by the dread *Magic* card-game people, Wizards of the Coast.

Nebula Awards. Novel: *Slow River* by Nicola Griffith. Novella: "Da Vinci Rising" by Jack Dann. Novelette: "Lifeboat on a Burning Sea" by Bruce Holland Rogers. Short: "A Birthday" by Esther M. Friesner. Grand Master Award (as proleptically announced as long ago as March): Jack Vance.

Voice from the Past. "... there are all kinds of science fiction which I've been unable to read. [...] Also the Asimov *Foundation* series; I couldn't read those even when I was a teenager. They just didn't seem true or real; my memory is of saying, This is *obviously* not the way things would be." Thus Greg Benford, interviewed by Charles Platt in 1979; he is now the author of the Asimov-Estate-authorized spinoff novel *Foundation's Fear* (1997). The whirligig of time leads to many little ironies.

Thog's Masterclass. *Shame On Your Filthy Mind Dept*: "You can't make people good by force." / 'They do us,' he said gloomily. 'With a hair brush.' / 'But ...' / 'It seems to me,' said Nicky, 'that everything is in a muddle. If ...' / 'Look,' said the practical Judy. 'Do you approve of being spanked?' / 'No, I don't.' / 'Well, then.' / 'Well, then what?' / 'If you can't make people be good with a hair brush, you can't with a vibrator, can you?' / 'I don't think it is the same.' / 'It is the same,' said Judy. (T. H. White, *The Master*)

The man did not look flat-faced enough to have been stricken mad by the syphilis. In fact, he had the proud-profiled features of a highborn Mexica. The house in which he lived, however, would not befit the most minor of the highborn, being built neither of stone nor adobe, but of wood. Admittedly, there was a great abundance of wood in this district, and very little stone for building, a reversal of the situation which prevailed back at Court, but even so –

Quetzalhuitzilin bowed, and presented the bundle of gifts he had been entrusted with by the Internal Department of Spontaneous Generosity. Xochiyaotl bent down and picked over the bundle, frowning. He called a Chol slave forward – these tailless monkeys of the forest seemed barely passable facsimiles of humans – and checked off the bundle's contents on the tally list. At last satisfied that it made up the expected annual maintenance cost of a Mexica warrior, Xochiyaotl nodded his head and bowed back to Quetzalhuitzilin.

Quetzalhuitzilin was not a warrior, of course; not half the scribes and functionaries who kept the human lifeblood of the Empire pumping back to its continually bleeding heart back in Tenochtitlan were. But protocol and the cult of the Mexica superbeing demanded that everyone carry the sword, adopt the demeanour and style himself the fiercest fighting man between the two oceans. One must put on a display for the savages. The savages, clustered thickset and muscular round the house of the Man Who Was Mad, rocked from foot to foot in appropriate nervousness and occasionally rolled their eyes at the feathered finery of the handful of warriors who accompanied Quetzalhuitzilin in his mission.

Let them rock and roll. The escort was no impressive sight to Quetzalhuitzilin. All it meant was that it was no longer safe for one armed man to run alone through the Chol border country; a development which was mirrored on every march of the Empire, sometimes in the Valley of Mexico itself.

The reception room of the house was large, but did not have the feel of coolness and proof against sudden aboriginal attack that good stone walls would have provided. It was filled with trade items from every tribe and nation, some of which must have fallen into the category of graven idols. Many of these idols, piled though they were highly and unceremoniously into mix-and-match pantheons, dwarfed the tiny soapstone statues of Huitzilopochtli, Protector of the Pious, and Coatlicue, his Mother, bride of the sacrificed, that sat by an altar barely large enough to sacrifice a monkey foe-tus on at the far end of the room.

Xochiyaotl read the letter. “Chicoyaxa of the Department for Advance Reconnaissance Through Ostensible Trade greets his noble brother and asks after the health of himself and his family” – Pshaw! This was written by a scribe, I have no family – ‘taking as he does so the opportunity to present our younger cousin Quetzalhuitzilin of Tlatelolco, warrior of the order of the Jaguar, 20 times glory-covered in mortal combat.’ Ah! So you’ve slaughtered a few peasant braves and dragged their cowards back for sacrifice,” said Xochiyaotl. “On the other hand, our noble cousin Metzicoatl here” – he pointed to the escort’s Advance Scout – “tells me you play a mean game of pelote. Furthermore, that you’ve been studying some of the classical disciplines. Zero-value mathematics, for instance.”



The COZUMEL Incident

Dominic Green



Unthinkable that any warrior should disdain the skills of war! Was not atlatl practice compulsory for all Department members? Quetzalhuitzilin picked through his reply carefully, as through a nest of serpents.

“It is true that I have been taught some of the old Toltec knowledge. But this zero thing is very hard to get one’s head round. The very idea that I can reduce a thing to nothing simply by multiplication! If I walk up to you and shout ‘Zero!’, Grandfather, do you disappear?”

Quetzalhuitzilin’s “Grandfather,” who was no more closely related to him than any of the tailless monkeys, exploded with mirth, projectile-guffawing bits of half-chewed maize over Huitzilin’s escort. “Very good! Very good! But you are conversant with the Addition and Subtraction of Zero?”

“That is common sense, Grandfather. If I have two beans and add no beans, I must have two beans still.”

Xochiyaotl tapped the side of his oh-so-aristocratic nose. “Ah yes, coz, but please remember; there is a thing more head-muddling still than the Multiplication of Zero, which is the Division by it. It is rumoured that the Master Mathematicians back in the Place of the Fruit of the Cactus have had to invent a completely new number purely in order to deal with it.”

Despite himself, Huitzilin scoffed openly. “A new number? Where is this new number? Between three and four, perhaps?”

This answer seemed to delight Xochiyaotl, who lit up like a mirror hit by the sun. “No, I am afraid that place is already taken. Tochtlipoca of Azcapotzalco claims to have discovered a number of great importance in this region which he terms the ‘circular number,’ but claims not to be able to write it down. Of course, nobody believes him.”

Of course, nobody believes him. How many times had Huitzilin heard those same words said of the man who now sat before him swaddled in his cloak, talking of new numbers as if a man could have two too many fingers?

He’s got powerful friends back at Tenochtitlan. He cured the Tlatoani’s concubine of the Chol Plague. He believes our Sun is about to go out for lack of fuel, and that Men are due to be replaced by Super-Beings. If crazy is a hillock, he is a Smoking Mountain.

Huitzilin bowed. “My Grandfather is very wise.”

Discredit him, had been the brief. Report back that he chases ghosts and bogeys, that he believes the world is round and we are living on the outside. We have no need of a Trade Mission in the Eastern Ocean. We need more funds to combat the Tarascan threat.

"The World is Round," announced Xochiyaotl, "and we are Living on the Outside. Furthermore, strange human creatures live on the world's underbelly, unobserved by mortal men."

Huitzilil attempted bravely to act naturally. "How would they survive? Would they swing arm over arm through the upside-down grass like monkeys?"

Xochiyaotl paused; then scratched his head in just as much puzzlement as his noble nephew.

"I do not know," he said. "But such was my information from a man who claimed great knowledge of the subject."



Subhuman servants were bringing round pitchers of chalchihochtli, the drinking of which on its own might have been enough to damn a relatively young man such as Xochiyaotl to execution. Huitzilil bit into a worm-cake thoughtfully. "The warrior asks his Uncle respectfully where this man originated. Was it by any chance the fabled isles of Aztlan, or the country of Quetzalcoatl?"

Macanaytl smiled a smile like a crack in granite. Stalactites of teeth were visible within. "He came from neither of these places," he said, with evident relish. "He came from an Unidentified Floating Object."

Huitzilil nearly coughed out his mouthful of lake-mud worms with amusement. "A 'Mountain in the Sea'? Uncle, you are surely not suggesting that the things reported by lying and incredulous aboriginals actually exist?"

"I am indeed."

"But that's impossible! Our finest canoe-wrights have told the Tlatoani flatly that a dugout of such a size would break up on the gentlest ocean swell."

"We already *have* ships the size of mountains! Not dugouts, but reed-boats! What is a chinampa but a ship with a market garden atop it? Our very capital city is *made* of mountain-vessels, boy! We only neglect to build ocean-going chinampas because we know in our wisdom that there's nothing beyond the ocean. Only it seems there are people who are not quite so clever as we are, and do not have this knowledge, and they may have discovered that we are not quite so clever after all."

"Don't tell me." Huitzilil, to his terror, found himself having to chew his cheeks to keep a lid on his giggles. "You've actually seen a Mountain-Ship."

Xochiyaotl's face twisted painedly. "Well – not actually *seen* as such, no. But I have spoken to one who claimed to have been abducted by one of these devices. This gentleman spent many days on board the aliens' vessel, where he learned that their point of origin was a rich and fabulous land called 'Esupaniyam,' that they call our land 'Cipanuco,' and that they live on the bottom of the round world. I have also seen the tracks where two of the landing craft that emerged from an alien mothership were dragged up a beach. Two of the lying aboriginals of whom you were speaking, in fact those very two aboriginals who are standing behind you now, conducted me to the spot."

Huitzilil turned in his chair as though surprised by an armed assailant. The native butlers stared solidly into the distance, giving no impression that they had

understood the High Nahuatl being spoken at the table, save perhaps for a slight set of the jaw against laughing or snarling; whatever primitive emotions natives were capable of imitating.

"You were sent here to spy on me," said Uncle Xochiyaotl matter-of-factly. Not a question or an accusation; a simple statement of fact. Huitzilil's neck hairs bristled like the spines of a pufferfish, expecting attack from behind by his Uncle's disturbingly military servants.

Tell half the truth. "I was sent here to carry out a tacit audit of your activities, Uncle. It is claimed that you distract attention from the low cost-effectiveness of this trade mission here by inventing peculiar tales of red-skinned invaders from the East."

"Ha! Last year it was 'you're making too much profit and therefore not concentrating enough on Military Intelligence.' By the Four Suns, there's no wonder this nation is going to the sons of the Fifth."

"These will be the fabled Supermen, I take it?"

Xochiyaotl nodded. "Does not prophecy say that our Mexica sun will go out like any other, and be replaced by a new sun shining on a new race of persons? My informant, whose name was Ferunanudo, was a man of bravery worthy of a Mexica warrior, though in fact he was an Arawac, a native of a land across the ocean to the East, where, before you ask, Quetzalcoatl is not a resident. Together with the Arawac woman to whom he was betrothed, he escaped from an Unidentified Floating Object en route to a UFO colony to the far south of here, known as Tiyafrume, where both he and his wife were destined to be slaves of the Super-Beings. A hurricane blew up, and he and several of the inhuman creatures abandoned the vessel in a small boat, alighting on these shores, where, due to the incapacity of his half-drowned alien captors, Ferunanudo was able to escape. Shortly after this pass, alas, he contracted an alien disease from which these people suffer, in the course of which many small sores dot the body, and from which, already weakened by a long sea voyage, he died."

"How convenient," said Huitzilil.

Xochiyaotl nodded in agreement. "You may have witnessed victims of the illness on your journey here; at court it is called the Chol Plague. My treatment of Ferunanudo, though unsuccessful, nevertheless paved the way for a rather more successful treatment of the tlatoani's concubine Tezcayatl. The Plague is actually carried by the Super-Beings on their UFOs; Chol and Mexica humans have little or no resistance to it. Trade with the UFO-nauts, and with it the carriage of plague, has increased sharply in recent years among some of the more remote island tribes, who are prepared to be aware of the reds' presence, even if the Mexica are not. But still, argument without proof is pointless, cousin." He clapped his hands. "Send in the Lady Xochicue."



Two of Xochiyaotl's frighteningly large subhuman servants nodded and vanished.

"I have never heard of any Lady Xochicue," said Huitzilil suspiciously.

"Her Nahuatl name. She is of noble birth, the daughter of an Arawac *cacique*; notwithstanding this, she was abducted by alien slavers and taken aboard their Mountain-Vessel for a period of ten moons, during which time they forced their sexual attentions upon her

and conducted sinful experiments on her person, which included forcing her to inhale fumes which made her very sick, and cutting her flesh with knives and pouring a running metal over the wounds."

Now Huitzilil was entirely incredulous. A running metal? However, his incredulity was cut short as the woman entered. She would, if properly human, have been quite beautiful; Huitzilil imagined that if *he* had been such an alien conqueror, he would have seized such a woman. Her teeth were in all the correct positions, and she was properly cross-eyed, a sure sign of high social status among the Yucatec. But the fact that most leapt out at Huitzilil was that she was in an advanced state of pregnancy.

"Is that —?" he said, nodding at the woman's prominent equatorial bulge.

"Ask her," said Xochiyaotl. "She speaks Nahuatl."

Huitzilil cleared his throat, and mentally lowered himself. "Woman," he said. "You claim falsely to have been among fictitious Super-persons. Erm... what were they like?"

The woman lowered her gaze respectfully, not that she could have committed the capital sin of looking a Mexica lord straight in the eye in any event. "They are great hairy men of prodigious size," she reported. "They smell most foully of a type of onion in which they steep their food, and of the stink that comes of not washing."

"Hardly supermen to rival the Mexica," said Huitzilil, smirking.

"— Their vessels' primary armament, the *canonas*, are great iron *xiuhcoatl* capable of striking death to a man a thousand paces distant. Their home country is a land called 'Cuba' which is many days' sail distant, yet they find their way across many miles of ocean by means of a magic needle which shows them the direction of the Great Jaguar even in overcast weather. They possess metal swords the thickness of our thinnest hammered iron, with which they can cut a man's hand clear from his arm." Being a non-Mexica, the woman added smugly, "One of them is the equal of any ten Mexica warriors"; but she neglected to say in what respect the comparison was intended.

Huitzilil had already choked on his pulque ten impossibilities ago. Xochiyaotl interrupted. "So you see, cousin, one can smell, and smell, and be a super-being."

Huitzilil waved the woman's testimony away with a chicken bone. "The babblings of a primitive mind. We'll see what the child looks like when it emerges. I'll wager it'll have the fine features of either her brother or her father." He chortled into his *chalchiuhoctli*. "In any case, this woman's account conflicts seriously with that of her aboriginal 'husband,' for he stated the name of the aliens' homeland to be 'Esupaniyam.' Now we hear 'Cuba.' Tell me, woman — do these hirsute gentlemen call their 'Cuba' rich and fabulous?"

"I have been to Cuba," announced the woman.

Even Xochiyaotl gaped.

"What is it like?" said Xochiyaotl. "What are the people like?"

"It is a poor country," said Xochicue, nodding in deference to Huitzilil. "The people are mostly like us."

Huitzilil narrowed his eyes imperiously at the 'us,' but the woman appeared not to notice her *faux pas*. "But there are also many people who are like the Castilan, the Super-persons. They rule. Some of the folk like us are the property of Castilan persons, and may be bought and sold, as I might buy or sell a maize cake."

There was a long silence. Huitzilil was acutely aware that Xochiyaotl was staring at him.

"A military threat," said Xochiyaotl. "Can you understand that, cousin?"

"You don't seriously imagine this woman speaks the truth?" said Huitzilil, in a way that suggested he attached as much credibility to tales of the Moundbuilders in the North and the fabulous Empire of the Inca.

"I have tested her truthfulness most rigorously, both by cross-reference and by torture," said Xochiyaotl. "She adheres most faithfully to her account."

"Did you not kill a slave and examine his entrails?"

"I prefer my slaves to cook my breakfast rather than be it, nephew. Xochicue claims to speak the language of these transmundane interlopers, and I hope one day to use her to communicate with them. In the meantime, I am learning the language, which she calls 'Esupaniol.' It is like no other language known to men, having no words even vaguely similar to Nahuatl. There are, I must admit, times when I still suspect she is slyly making it up in her head, particularly when she insists that some

words are male and some female."

"Now, Grandfather, you begin to see sense. Kill the woman for her lies, and then we'll see an end to it."

Xochiyaotl raised a thoughtful eyebrow, like a condor banking into the wind. "You may change your tune before the current Sun is out, coz. I have news from native sources that a Castilan Mountainship is anchored off the North Coast only a day's hike north of the isle of Cozumel."

Quetzalhuitzilil laughed. "Very well, Grandfather. But I'll wager you the clothes I stand up in and the arse I sit down on that this woman is a cunning concocter of tales who takes advantage of innocent old men."

"There is no such thing as an innocent old man," said Xochiyaotl. "Furthermore, I have no desire for either your clothes or your posterior. However," he said, gesturing at Xochicue, "I cannot afford to keep this woman on my meagre stipend. She is a good if unconventional cook, she speaks many languages, she is a daughter of royalty, and in my personal opinion is a most excellent bedfellow composed of plump and agreeable curves. If you prove to be wrong in this instance, therefore, you will take this woman to wife without dowry and remove her costly presence from my household, whilst at the same time enriching your own."

Xochicue looked at Xochiyaotl, and then doubtfully back at Huitzilil, like a farmer's wife sizing up a cock turkey. "Lord, ah, this is too good a reward for too short a service —"

Huitzilil's anger flared. "It may amuse the great lady to turn down a warrior of the line of Acamapichtli. It does not amuse the warrior." He rose to his feet, folding



his arms, brooking no argument. "I accept."

Xochiyaotl smirked covertly, and winked at Xochicue, who burst into a radiant smile, rushed forward and showered Huitzilil with kisses. "Oh my lord, *thank you!* You will not be disappointed in your decision, I promise!"

Huitzilil stood deathly still, like a man being buzzed by a poisonous insect, hoping it will go away. He had a feeling he had been deceived. He addressed Xochiyaotl.

"And if I prove to be correct?"

Xochiyaotl smiled. "My dear Grandson, I will attend the fourth-month celebrations and marry Coatlicue."



"...and there is, of course, a Pipiltin conspiracy of silence on the subject of these alien travellers. They have been visiting our coasts for some years now, despite our rulers' insistence that eyewitness accounts of their vessels can be put down to 'extremely large whales' and 'the Moon seen very close to the Horizon.' Why, only a fortnight back I spoke with an Arawac shell trader who claimed to have swum out to the sea to one of their ships *when still a child*, and spoken with a being who called himself 'Donucixtobalcolon'..."

The conversation was outlandish, but it helped to pass the time, and also served to distract Huitzilil's attention from his throbbing head, for it had been a 20-rabbit evening the previous night. The forest in this region was especially luxuriant, and friendly native guides were scouting ahead for unfriendly native ambushes. The very air was thick, seeming to close in and crush the life out of the lungs. The sky had solidified down to an aerial equivalent of the four-foot forests, so that a man could at times not see the end of a javelin held out before him in any direction, whether due to fog or foliage.

"Please explain this to me, uncle. Why would the Pipiltin want to suppress all knowledge of an alien invasion? Surely the warriors-in-chief would leap to the nation's defence in such a matter."

The older man grinned. "Because we are the supermen! For any other supermen to come on the scene would be unthinkable. It would topple us from our thrones as the favoured of the Sun. Besides, the Office of the Tlatoani hope to bargain with the invaders. After all, the Reds are but few in number, and they bring many things of great value to the Tlatoani, in exchange for which they seem willing to ask only for gold, which appears to be of great scarcity in their homeland."

Quetzalhuitzilil pouted. "The Mexica will never lose the favour of the Gods! We are the tribe of Huitzilopochtli. Do we not give tribute to the Gods by the villageful?"

"— Just as our people used to give tribute to the Tepanec an hundred years ago," interposed Xochiyaotl. "And then we wisely rose up against the Tepanec and overthrew them, taking their empire, the empire that they themselves had built on the ruins of the Toltec empire. Do you not think that yet another people will not come to wrest Mexico away from us? Better that we rise up wisely against our gods and find another set who don't demand so much blood from the people. Besides, our own gods' priests admit that our sun will die in earthquakes and the Castilan replace us —"

Huitzilil's anger flared. His hand moved to his sword. "I should kill you for such blasphemy!"

Xochiyaotl cackled unpleasantly. "Calm down, cousin. You've never lifted that sword once in anger against anyone who had half a chance of killing you back, and I've fought on the Tarascan Front. As, incidentally, have all the four gentlemen who now surround us at this very moment. My personal honour-guard as an Eagle Knight. They understand Nahuatl, and would die for me, as I would for them." He patted Huitzilil's sword in a manner in which a warrior might pat the buttock of an attractive boy captive. "That's a dress sword; you and I know together it wouldn't cut through a melon. *This*, on the other hand" — he swung his own huge and unwieldy article about him, and thin leaves flew in tatters from the trees — "is made with the black stone of the high slopes around Oaxaca, the first fruits of the volcano, and is sharp enough to lop a Tarascan's head from his shoulders — and Tarascans, as we all know, are not as other men, but are made of iron."

He wafted the sword effortlessly through a branch; juice spurted out like green blood. *It could be the blood of a Tarascan at that*, thought Huitzilil idly. *Their blood could be green for all we know. Tonatiuh knows we've never managed to shed any of it.*

"...Of course, the Castilan are men of iron too," said Huitzilil. "Or so I have heard. Do their warriors not wear armour made of iron from head to foot?"

"It has been reported," said Xochiyaotl. "Personally, I do not credit it. For beings of such a level of technological advancement that they can sail ships the size of mountains round the spherical world without falling off, metal armour would seem rather stupid." He picked at his own cotton armour thoughtfully. "If it were not gold, it would rust. If it were gold, it would dent. Why wear iron, when cotton is better?"

The natives were getting restless up ahead. Huitzilil, as befitted a well-educated young Mexica noble, had been taught not to understand Chol, and had to ask Xochiyaotl for a translation.

"Footprints," said Xochiyaotl. "Running. Of feet that have known no shoes."

Huitzilil stiffened, and fitted a javelin into his atlatl. Here was a fear that was real.

"Running away?" he said hopefully.

Xochiyaotl shook his head. "Towards us."

Wild, undomesticated Chol, bearing peasants' arrows that, unlike a warrior's arrows, were poisoned. The Chol did not keep captives alive for sacrifice, and would instead let a brave man rot on the forest floor without memorial. More to the point, the poison was rumoured to be excruciating. Huitzilil settled into a half-crouch, and scanned the inscrutable immutable green of the forest.

I do not belong here. I belong among the boulders and the cactuses, where the wind rustles in the rushes.

More cries in Chol came from up ahead. Xochiyaotl answered, then drew a small stone dagger, dropping his sword and spear as no warrior should, and rushed forward through the jungle. Huitzilil picked up his superior's weapons grimly. Not a Mexica shopkeeper could be allowed to live who could not act like at least half a warrior. And this man claimed to be an Eagle Knight!

Huitzilil padded forward, his macuahuitl and atlatl clanking and banging on the close-knit tree-trunks, feeling twice a fighting man for a change in such undistinguished company. Xochiyaotl was bending over something sprawled

across the pathway, flesh-coloured, though outlandishly painted and feathered in a foreign though instantly familiar fashion. A Chol brave, gloriously dead, limbs twisted and broken, twigs clutched in his lifeless hands, as though he had fallen from a tree like a monkey shot with one of his own poison arrows. But this had been no arrow. Not unless men in deep Chol territory possessed three nipples. For this man had a small red circle between two of his ribs; a precise, mathematically perfect wound, not the ragged, honourable hole cut by a priest or warrior, but an odd, disturbingly precise incision, like one made by a lamprey on a river fish.

"Excellent," he heard Xochiyaotl saying. "With any luck, the Castilan stone should still be present in the wound." He saw Xochiyaotl reach into the hole, uncaring of the flies, blood and smell, and take out a long jade knife, with which he pried the horrid hole open, and rummaged around inside it like a merchant feeling in a sack. After only a second, his fingers emerged from the hole bearing a small, red, glistening spherical object.

Huitzilin knew this was not the warrior's heart. He had seen hearts before, at religious festivals.

"What is it?" he said.

"A stone," said Xochiyaotl proudly. "An Alien slingstone. The ignorant bushbunnies of this region had thought that the Castilan killed by unleashing a Serpent of Fire from their weapons like that of Huitzilopochtli, until I examined one man's wound and discovered a plain, ordinary slingstone; albeit a metal one, probably of lead." He tossed the alleged stone to Huitzilin.

"It could be a hailstone," said Huitzilin stubbornly.

Xochiyaotl rolled his eyes. "Tonantzin! A hailstone where there is neither rain nor thunder? Whatever will the Gods chuck at us next?"

"Perhaps it was thrown up by a volcano."

"An extraordinarily accurate volcano in my opinion, for it hit him in the heart, scaring away his fellows, and doing us a favour, for they would surely have done their level best to kill us had we encountered them before they had met the Castilan."

"You're saying Castilan did this?"

More native gabbling from up ahead. Xochiyaotl turned his head to hear, like a bird listening for worms. An idea seemed to wriggle into his ears, and he turned to Huitzilin smiling.

"We'll find out. Feet that have known shoes, continuing up the pathway dead ahead. But, our tracker says, no shoes that he has ever seen the marks of. Shoes with curious and semicircular raised heels. A peculiar smell, like fine-ground pepper; the smell of the Castilan's weapons. And an extraordinary scent like onions. The smell of the Castilan himself."



The path was tortuous and uncertain; the wild animals that had made it cared little for as-the-crow-flies distance, as no crows flew here, only quetzals. Every twist in the path promised to conceal a Super-army.

"Don't be apprehensive, grandson," said Xochiyaotl, placing a hand on Huitzilin's shoulder. "By all accounts Castilan are clumsy and do not belong in the jungle, rather like Mexica. My trackers will sniff them out before we come within a thousand paces of them."

Huitzilin was not convinced. "If that is the case, why did the Chol fight them?"

Xochiyaotl shrugged. "Because the Chol are extremely stupid."

Huitzilin's uplift of spirits lasted until the scouts began whispering rather than yelling, and waddling back to Xochiyaotl in half-crouches with news in fluent Subhuman. Abruptly, Xochiyaotl himself dropped to hands and knees and began squirming his way down towards the forward position. A Mexica warrior! On all fours like a catamite!

Huitzilin dropped into a weapon-ready crouch and followed suit, hampered by helpful aboriginal hands grabbing the ceremonial feathers of his traditional jaguar costume – which, rich though it was, was brewing up his blood within it like a boiling-pot in the green heat of the forest – and shoving those feathers, meant to be proudly displayed at all times, shamefully down out of sight inside his headpiece.

He hopped into place beside Xochiyaotl and the Chol scout; and there, not 20 paces further down the track, he caught his first glimpse of a Superman.



He was hairy as a monkey, and, also like a monkey, short-haired on the head; of a good size, larger than a human, and with skin a bright lobster-red, the colour of the Rising Sun that spawned him. However, what Xochiyaotl and his advance scout were staring at was the clothing hung around his frame, which was made largely if not entirely of plates of dully gleaming metal. Perhaps, thought Huitzilin as he stared at the Alien's metallized integument, it was no clothing, but the creature's very substance, a crablike shell within which the occupant might know no fear. Why, even his face seemed to shine metallically in the overhead rays of the sun, as if covered with tiny drops of moisture –

"He sweats," said Xochiyaotl quietly. "He's no god."

"Gods sweat, shit, fuck and menstruate," said Huitzilin. "Does not the goddess Tlazolteotl eat her own dung?"

"The metal is heavy," said Xochiyaotl. "He sweats. That by his left-hand side will be his sword, hung at his belt. I'll wager it's metal too. Ometecuhtli, the land these people come from must be *made* of metal!"

"He is either a god, or a demon," insisted Huitzilin. "Does any man look like that?"

"Whether he be god, demon or pulque-hallucination, he is drunk and half asleep." Xochiyaotl nodded to the Arawac girl, who was now squatting behind them, obediently silent. "Xochicue says the Castilan, as they call themselves, are forever drunk, as they drink no milk or water, only wine. They also use wine in their religious ceremonies, claiming it to be the blood of their god."

"Tonantzin! If their god has wine for blood, he must be on a perpetual 400-rabbiter."

Xochiyaotl nodded. "In any case, let us use the sentry's incapacity to sneak around him and spy the capabilities of the Castilan host." He gesticulated in battle language to his scouts, and they disappeared into the foliage like sunbeams that walk the forest floor without lifting a leaf. Xochiyaotl followed them with a skill at least comparable. Huitzilin, a creature of the cactuses, was less adept at moving through woodland, and his bulky jaguar costume snagged on overhanging branches.

Now he could hear shouts, oaths, and laughter, in a language he could understand even less than he could Chol. The peculiar smell, the smell almost-of-onions, per-

meated the forest here, accompanied by a delicious smell of cooking meat. Despite his best intentions, Huitzilin felt hungry. There was a sound and smell of burning.

Ahead lay a clearing, and the clearing was swarming with metal men. Some had metal arms, some metal bodies, and some even sported metal heads. However, the fact that some of the metal heads had been discarded and were lying by the trees about the clearing with the leather straps that had secured them to the hairy heads of their wearers clearly visible dissuaded Huitzilin finally from the idea that the Castilan were men of iron.

The clearing had been made by an enormous fallen tree, a real old man of the forest whose death had taken other trees down with it. The tree had provided the red-skinned invaders both with open space to camp in and with firewood, which they were cutting in quantity using huge and frightening metal knives, one of which was still in use by a heavy-set bearded alien who was cutting arm-thick branches from the dead tree trunk in deft single swipes. The heat of the Castilan cooking-fires had evidently driven away the fog. A number of normal humans of sub-Mexica type were scattered about the clearing, fetching, carrying, cooking. Huitzilin liked the set-up; a well-organized military expedition, perhaps too well-organized to be allowed to report back to its commanders.

The normals wore pendants of wood and string, the pendant part consisting of two pieces of wood intersecting at a right angle. Many of the Castilan wore such pendants too, only theirs appeared to be made of iron, and even, in one outstanding case, of silver. Perhaps the pendants served some function of social differentiation. And what were they cooking? It smelled similar to pork. Huitzilin moved closer, his tongue tasting the air like a snake, his mouth watering despite his warrior's code of ethics.

Then he realized what meat it was the Castilan were cooking, and saw it, squirming on the spits.

Huitzilin's amazement was not at the Castilan cannibalism, but at their complete ignorance of culinary decorum. People were eaten raw; to cook them was not only shockingly gauche, but must surely be a sin. Besides, his grandfather, the esteemed priest Axacatezcatl, had warned Huitzilin that human sacrificial flesh should be eaten either raw, or boiled for at least 24 hours, since terrible vomiting and fever could result if it were anything in between. Furthermore, the brains and spine should be stripped from the carcass if the ceremonial ingester were not to suffer from Priests' Disease and die limbless and drooling. Yet these Castilan were cutting down the carcasses from the stakes to which they had been tied, and throwing them onto the dirty, unhygienic floor without so much as cutting off the heads. The carcasses were all normal humans; some were still alive, and the Castilan who removed them from the stake was obliged to slit some throats. Blood bubbled out weakly, the bodies having been dried up by the great heat of the fires piled up round the stakes.

"They must have been great warriors indeed, to have been granted such painful deaths," said Huitzilin in grudging admiration. Xochicue, who crouched at his elbow, snorted demurely.

"They are no warriors, but slaves who were accepted into the service of the Castilan God, and have since turned back to their native faiths, running into the woods to continue their worship of their childhood

deities. The Castilan have tied them to stakes and burnt them alive for it. See the charred native idols piled up against the fires?"

"Xiuhcoatl." Huitzilin was appalled. "Such madness in the name of religion." He shook his head like a man watching a pulque dream. "Aren't they even going to eat them? What's the point of killing someone if you're not even going to eat them? This is killing for pure sport. It disgusts me."

"They will not eat them," said Xochicue, removing a stone knife from her sleeve in a manner which suggested that, were she to be attacked by Castilan, she would attempt to use the weapon, firstly on the Castilan, and lastly on herself. "They will bury them in the earth, there to be dug up by the dog and devoured by the worm. They would do the same to any *inudiyo*."

"*Inudiyo*?"

"You or I, lord. To a Castilan, you and I are the same basic slave material."

This was the final insult, the maguey fibre which broke the back of the llama. Incensed with rage, Huitzilin stood up.



It took about a minute for the fact of Huitzilin's presence to communicate itself to the entire Castilan host; most of them were still laughing and joking at the burned semi-cadavers being cut down from the stakes. Even after a minute, the Castilan hesitated, not even laying hand upon what Xochiyaotl had proclaimed to be their swords, as if unsure whether Huitzilin in his jaguar costume were indeed a true human, or instead some peculiar form of biped feline.

"You who call yourselves Super-persons!" yelled Huitzilin, utterly incomprehensibly. "Know that I, Quetzalhuitzilin of Tlatelolco, have *earned* the title of Jaguar Warrior in 20 bouts of single combat with fierce peasants armed with wicked agricultural implements!"

He continued in the same vein.

The Castilan maintained their 30-yard distance, and none of them had yet laid hand upon their weapons, despite the fact that several of Xochiyaotl's 30-strong host had risen from the bushes with Huitzilin. Commands were being barked, however, and individual soldiers were moving to where the commanding noble with the silver pendant pointed, with no argument, no sullen shuffling indifference, no talking back in furious petulant Nahuatl, as in any Mexica army.

If I didn't know better, thought Xochiyaotl, I'd think they were forming a battle line. But they're over ten paces outside the optimum distance for an atlatl cast, and besides, they have no spears or bows –

Do they?

It was the bow that alerted Xochiyaotl. A small, puny-looking, unattended item scarcely two feet across the arms, and equipped with an awkward wooden handle where the bowman's hand should grip it, but still unmistakably a bow, sitting by a campfire within reach of a cook who was slurping on a spoon. Within reach, as all the weaponry in the Castilan camp had been. Ready, to hand, at all times; the habits of a people used to war.

However, the line of Castilan facing off Xochiyaotl's trackers across paces of forest appeared also to be cooking rather than engaging in aggressive activity, hefting those curious metal tubes with heavy wooden bashing

ends which Xochiyaotl had assumed were clubs... Each man was holding such a tube and emptying a black powder into it, like fine-ground pepper. The handle on the cook's bow had just such a heavy wooden end, as if it were meant to be put against the shoulder of the warrior as the weapon fired...

"Tonantzin!"

Xochiyaotl leapt from his place of concealment just as the first Castilan tubanist raised his tube, fitting the wooden bashing end of the club into the hollow of his shoulder, levelling the handle-end directly at Huitzilil.

Xochicue rushed forward, cannoning into Huitzilil. "Lord—!"

The weapon bucked and barked like bottled thunder. Huitzilil jumped out of his jaguar-skin in many places. Several more of Xochiyaotl's Chol trackers leapt out of the bushes in alarm.

Xochicue fell forward, both herself and the child she was carrying enfiladed by the alien weapon. The effect, Xochiyaotl observed with detachment, was similar to being struck by an arrow. Huitzilil dropped his weapons and caught the girl as she fell.

Horrifically, the Castilan were not laughing, pointing and jumping up and down as any normal warrior would on having cast a successful shot, but merely carrying on with the business of bloodshed with the detached concentration of peasants harvesting maize. The slingsman/sorcerer was refilling his weapon with the pepper-powder, but his fellows were still gazing down the length of their club-handles. Chol warriors were bursting from the trees into a storm of bloody annihilation which they could not even see. Xochiyaotl could hear it, however, singing through the trees like a swarm of insects. More Chol, with more sense, were already up and running; Xochiyaotl wondered why he was not joining them. Then he noticed the thick clouds of acrid smoke that had sprung up from the Castilan's weapons, and the fact that the creatures were advancing into the forest, like overbold hunters wading into a lake of alligators, surrounded by the forest mist and the swirling red smoke of their own creation.

"Attack!" he yelled in Chol. "They cannot see to shoot through the mist!"

The forest was silent a moment, and Xochiyaotl saw Castilan figures armed with *xiuhcoatl* advancing through the smog toward the sound of his voice. Then feathered shapes rose whooping from the forest floor, and flint *macuahuitl*-teeth whirled and clanged against metal all over the forest, little lightning-sparks of static flickering through the fog as though a miniature man-made thunderstorm were in progress.

Now, thought Xochiyaotl, *we have closed inside the range of your cowardly devices, and we shall see who is the true warrior race. Unless...*

Unless they also have close-range weapons the equal of our own.

There was a noise like the hissing of a thousand serpents, and Xochiyaotl heard the sound of good men dying, accompanied by another sound like the tearing of fabric,

maybe even of the fabric of the air itself, as the fibre-slim metal blades of which Xochicue had spoken cut through it. A huge, glittering mansized shape tore through the forest toward him, and Xochiyaotl made a desperate *atlatl* cast. Prepared for it, the soldier dashed the dart aside with a metal shield big and bright as a new sun for the world, and lunged in at Xochiyaotl, his blade flickering like a hummingbird's wing. Xochiyaotl desperately squirmed in behind his sword, but the Castilan weapon changed direction like a flash of lightning, and pain flickered across the Mexica's upper arm. His *macuahuitl* dropped useless, and he sank back against a tree, offering his throat to the enemy.

His throat remained untouched. The Castilan was on the ground gurgling, and something like a great jaguar with biologically inappropriate plumage was sitting on his chest, stabbing redundantly as if it still could not believe the Castilan had fallen. Xochiyaotl took command, grabbing his subordinate's arm and hoisting him aloft.

"They bleed! They bleed, Grandfather, they bleed!"

"So it appears! And whilst they bleed, we run!"



Uncaring of the direction in which he ran, so long as it was Away, Xochiyaotl plunged through the forest floor, becoming relievedly aware that his pursuers' iron overcoats were hampering their ability to keep up with the fleet speed of a cotton-clad Mexica. At length, he heard commands shouted in *Esupaniol*, and the clanking of armour and the wheezing of pursuing Castilan appeared to cease from behind.

Quetzalhuitzilil stopped, and wheeled down behind a bush. "They do not pursue! Grandfather, can it be that they fear us?"

Xochiyaotl shook his head. "They do not wish to leave a defensible location. They fear an ambush." The old warrior spat and sank panting against a tree. "They fear that the destruction of our scouting party was too easy, that it was bait for something worse. *Teoyaomiqui*, such soldiers! With 500 such men, I could conquer all Mexico."

"Luckily there are only 30 of them, Grandfather. Mexico is safe."

Xochiyaotl nodded in a way that suggested he considered Huitzilil to be insane. He looked out through the trees. The forest was becoming larger, a hundred-footer at the very least; that could only mean the two men were on its very edges. And that, in turn, could only mean...

"The sea," he gasped. "Cousin, we must adjust our location immediately. Where we are now, the Castilan can herd us down to the seashore."

He stared frantically at the horizon, trying to find a patch of green into which to run.

Then the horizon shifted.

A huge, brown, dappled mass of colour, which Xochiyaotl had assumed was a seashore cliff, was moving across his field of vision, overtaking the trees. On its upper extremities he could dimly see figures walking, working, shouting, and a constellation of metal glints like sunlight twinkling off a waterfall. Above the trees, what he had taken to be a piece of off-white sky billowed



and bore the intersecting-line symbol of the Castilan. No sea-mirage, this. No ship-shaped explosion of marsh gas.

All the Gods together, it's the size of a small city. How can we compete with a thing like that?

Then the mists drifted, like a white sheet being drawn over matters, and the apparition was gone.

Xochiyaotl blinked. "Did you see that?"

"See what, Grandfather?"



The clearing still smelled of death and onions. The enemy had departed, taking with them everything that had been present in their roster, but the forest here still had their mark upon it – hacked into, cut open, excised, efficiently transformed from a growing greenness into a dead thing that had served the Castilan purpose.

Xochiyaotl picked his way through the fallen corpses and clouds of flies that circled like dust-motes in a window, to the only new and therefore interesting feature of the clearing; a large upright version of the crosspiece pendant worn by the Castilan, made of two wooden stakes lashed together and driven into the earth before a low earth mound whose function Xochiyaotl was able to guess. There was only one such mound.

So they bury their dead, thought Xochiyaotl. *It is, I suppose, not beyond the bounds of possibility that they also honour their parents, love their children, and pass maguey fibres devoutly through their tongues at festival time.*

"It was my fault, Grandfather. I should never have risen from concealment in that manner. If I had, they would never have ascertained our presence."

Xochiyaotl stared into the shifting colours of the remains of the Castilan campfire. "You were not to blame. That is the way we fight, standing up and shouting and screaming at our enemies. That is the way we have always fought. It is not the way these new folk fight. We will have to change our ways, or die."

"I felt a coward, stealing on a warrior from behind and killing him with a woman's knife."

Xochiyaotl growled like an edible dog who has become aware of his edibility. "And was he not a coward, to attack me with a metal sword and a weapon that spits thunder? And is a warrior who is a better warrior than another a coward? Am I a coward to swat a fly, now? Must I give it a fair fight? 'Coward' is not a word for soldiers, boy."

Huitzilil turned from his honorary grandfather and looked at the weapon in his hands. "Now we have one of their xiuhcoatl. We will discover how the things work, and destroy our enemies." He drew a bead on a tree experimentally. "BANG!" he shouted. The tree resolutely refused to vanish.

"It is the powder," said Xochiyaotl. "The Pepper-Powder. And the slingstone. Without both, the weapon will not work. And without the secret of the powder's manufacture, even that one weapon will be useless to us."

"It is composed of three parts saltpetre to two parts charcoal to one of sulphur," came a voice from the other side of the fire.

Xochiyaotl turned. As if by magic, a High Mexica stood there; a pipiltin lord, flanked by priests in full feathered finery, their hair solid mushroom-caps of clot-tered blood, crawling with the insects that specialized in living in priests' hair. Also, more importantly, flanked by Mexica warriors bearing atlatl in an uncomfortably

experienced manner.

Huitzilil gasped. "Uncle!"



Huitzilil almost ran to embrace his senior relative, until he saw the two short wood-and-metal tubes tucked into the old warrior's belt, and the glittering metal sword. There was a peculiar odour hanging in the air around the pipiltin, which Huitzilil could not place.

Huitzilil fell back in confusion, as does a drowning man from a floating log which proves to be a crocodile.

Chicoyaxa nodded slowly. "Did you think we pipiltin could not have been aware of the existence of the Castilan? First they came as rumours of strange huge vessels of inhuman design nosing about the Eastern Isles; then as tales of terrible conquest and slaughter from Arawac refugees. Finally, their vessels have begun to alight upon our shores."

He gestured to the soldiery on either side of him; two eagle knights bearing long xiuhcoatl detached from his escort and began gesturing with their weapons towards the bodies of the dead Chol. Troopers emerged from the trees, and started to pile the bodies onto the remains of the Castilan fires, which Chol servants appeared to be attempting to rekindle.

Xochiyaotl nodded back, as though the information was not new to him. "You knew. And yet you said nothing."

"Our entire nation is based so strongly upon its faith that our people would have considered them gods, as my own dear Quetzalhuihtzilil did only recently. Men we can fight, however strong and powerful. Gods we cannot."

The two priests detached in turn from the group and began picking about the bodies, using obsidian knives to extract the Castilan slingstones, which were then dropped into ornate wooden boxes held by blindfold Chol.

Huitzilil stepped forward, hand upon his macuahuitl. "But surely, respected and venerable relative, if the tlatoani were to inform our people that the Castilan are no gods, the people would believe him?"

"The tlatoani knows nothing, and by not informing him we are breaking no law that I can think of. Moctezuma is young and superstitious. If he were informed, he would surely begin issuing orders to contact the Castilan and make peace, offer gifts, offer welcome. We are preparing welcomes of our own."

Xochiyaotl snorted derisively and held up the barrel of the xiuhcoatl-weapon. "Against things such as this? Against men armoured with metal, with swords light as a flyswatter that can hack off a man's arm? *How long have you known, Chicoyaxa?*"

"We first encountered a real Castilan when one such creature, washed up on the shores of the Eastern Islands after his vessel foundered in a storm, was sold to our trade station on the isle of Cozumel by Ciboney slavers. He gladly taught our priesthood his language of Esupaniol and some of the history of his people. Later, following a dissection, we concluded that these were no gods, but merely a species of very formidable humans." He smiled. Chicoyaxa's smile was like two river worms. "Not unlike Mexica."

Xochiyaotl strolled around the fire, staring into the smoke like a priest at a divination. "So the Cozumel dissection story is true. What action are you taking?"

"We are in communication with the Castilan; with their regional governor of this area, no less, set up by

their kings and priesthood with scant consultation of the individuals who actually live here. His name is Velasquez. Like many of these creatures, he has an unaccountable affinity for gold, and will supply us with many things in return for it; metal swords, metal armour, these weapons." He patted the slingshot-tube at his belt. "He has promised that within a few short years we shall overcome the Tarascans with his aid. The only thing that he refuses to supply us with is ships, a reluctance we fully understand."

Huitzilin did not fully understand. "I do not fully understand," he said.

The smile became wide as a snake's swallowing an egg. "Cuba is a poor nation, with only one or two municipalities of any great size. A Mexica army sailing across the sea to Cuba would fall upon their ironman armies just as thunder always does on any quantity of metal. Once we have acquired knowledge of their weapons and technologies, the superior fighting quality of the Mexica brave will manifest itself."

Xochiyaotl gaped like a man watching a turkey stalk a jaguar. "You trust them to leave you alone until you have learned how to destroy them? What will they do, pray, in the interim?"

Chicoyaxa shrugged. "They have internal problems of their own. We have identified at least two nations among them already, the 'Porrutugiz' and the 'Castilan'; each is perpetually in competition with the other. We will lend them our battalions to conquer worthless nations such as the Chol and Arawac, then turn those battalions on the Castilan themselves."

"I hate to point this out, but in order to do that, you will need to possess men and vessels capable of crossing the Eastern Ocean; vessels which you have already stated the Castilan are unwilling to provide."

"Or the Western Ocean, cousin. Remember, the world is round. Besides, we already possess one such vessel."

Xochiyaotl stared. Chicoyaxa continued.

"Vessels have run aground on the shoals south of Cozumel for centuries. This has long been known; indeed, the natives of that wild region, thieves and bandits all, rely upon it. We stationed a xiquipile ashore just inland from the reefs, set lights resembling campfires on the rocks just as the natives do, and waited. We waited for five years, until a *galeyon* of the Castilan lost its way in a storm and ran ruinously aground, tearing her hull out on the rocks. Even then we did not take immediate possession of the vessel, but kept her under covert observation for a full day and a half further, our priestly advisors watching the manner in which her crew came ashore, hewed logs of various carefully-chosen woods, and attempted to effect a repair to their conveyance. The vessel now rests in a specially-constructed dock house secure from prying eyes in Two-Flower-Monkey military district near Nauhtlan."

Macanayatl nodded without surprise. "Flint-Knife Building. Many of the minor pipiltin have wanted to know for some years what a government Ostensible Trade department was doing concerning itself with warehouses."

"Quite so. Still, these alien contraptions are the very devil to replicate, and we are still not sure we have perfected the art."

"And what will happen when they find out that you

have purloined one of their vessels and taken its pilots prisoner, Mr Head-Full-of-Feathers? You have given them an excuse to attack the Empire and prosecute a war we cannot win."

Chicoyaxa shook his feathered headdress firmly. "No such war will be prosecuted. Governor Velasquez is most happy with his special relationship with the large quantities of gold flowing out of Tlatelolco. For some years now, he has been careful to discourage all expeditions in the direction of Mexico."

Xochiyaotl grabbed Huitzilin's bloodstained tunic and held it up to Chicoyaxa. "So what did we just encounter? Pulque dreams?"

Chicoyaxa waved his hand airily. "An expedition which our ally was unable to officially prevent. We are taking steps to ensure the Castilan never visit this coastline again. In two days' time, the fleet of vessels from which the Castilan whom you recently met originated will come upon Chanpoton and Campeche on the borders of our Empire. They will encounter some 30 xiquipiles which we have placed in readiness in that region with the permission of the local *caciques*. With or without their cunning thunder sticks, they will be annihilated. Not a word of them will return home to the Eastern Islands. Not one of their seafarers will ever dare sail west again."

"The time-honoured method of dealing with a hornet's nest," said Xochiyaotl. "Give it a good poke with a stick to teach it a lesson."

"It all relies on secrecy," said Chicoyaxa. "The Castilan will never return home to tell the tale –"

Xochiyaotl finished the sentence. "– and now that we've broached the subject, neither will we?"

"Happily, you overestimate your credibility at court, cousin. Go home and tell your stories of strange red men who fire metal slingstones out of tubes with a noise like thunder. Tell more of your round-world theories. Tell more of a mysterious country with ten times the power of the mighty Mexica, but whose inhabitants, paradoxically, no man has ever seen – and see how many people believe you. No, we are not afraid of your wild tales, cousin; mainly for the reason that, in ten years' time, such metal-sling-firing vessels will indeed be sailing up and down Lake Texcoco, and they will be flying eagle standards and manned by Mexica."

Having said his piece, he decocked his pistol, tucked it back into his belt, turned on his heel and walked sedately into the jungle with his entourage, which closed behind them like a green curtain. The heelmark Chicoyaxa had turned upon was hard, semicircular, and deep.

Then, the scent the pipiltin had left in the air came to Huitzilin. It was a curious odour, not unlike that of onions.

Xochiyaotl looked up at the western sky.

"Come, nephew. Our sun is going down. We have a long road ahead."



Dominic Green has written three previous stories for *Interzone*: "Moving Mysteriously" (issue 108), "Evertrue Carnadine" (issue 112) and "Everywhen" (issue 118). He lives in Milton Keynes.

Yearning for that holiday on Mars, but can't afford the memory implants? Longing for the abductee experience, but tired of waiting for the saucer men to call? Don't touch that chocolate pudding! Instead, you can give your head the equivalent of the full implants-up-the-hooter, probes-up-the-chute package for the price of a modem call by browsing your way to <http://www.dramatica.com/dramatica/>, and checking out the online text of *Dramatica: A New Theory of Story*. For those who haven't bumped against it in the movie press over the past three or four years, *Dramatica* is far the most ambitious and exotic of the clutch of software packages like *Blockbuster*, *Collaborator* and *Plots Unlimited* that promise movie plotting by numbers, and which have now become sufficiently part of over-ground screenwriting culture to warrant, for example, a reluctant chapter in the new edition of Syd Field's standard textbook *Screenplay*. The only one of these packages I've seen in anything more than a demo version is *Collaborator* (a crude online questionnaire, heavily influenced by Lajos Egri's books and unpublished teachings, that looks as if it was programmed in about an afternoon). But for anyone hooked on the equations by which Hollywood operates – and it's extraordinary how few filmgoers are even aware of the rigidly prescriptive three-act template to which most mainstream product is constructed – these programs have a spooky fascination, not least for the thought that educated people might spend up to \$350 (the pricetag on *Dramatica*) in the delusion that the lost formula for transmuting base stupidity into blockbusting talent has at last been distilled on to disk.

So you can imagine my intoxication when the theory behind *Dramatica* was serialized on the Web. Having progressed to sending off my \$19.95 for the hardcopy and dutifully turned all 416 pages, I can truthfully say that no text I have ever read has so vividly confronted me with the interplanetary distance that separates the Hollywood mind from ordinary consensual reality. From the unusual opening disclaimer "The Dramatica Theory was developed by Melanie Anne Phillips and Chris Huntley and was not researched nor based upon any other theories of story design or analysis" to the unintentionally-poignant back-of-book biographies of its Hollywood-casualty authors, *Dramatica* is a voyage to the far side and beyond. And the scary thing is, the industry is stuffed with people who actually think like this, and these are the people who are controlling our dreams.

In brisk outline, *Dramatica* claims to have discovered the mathematical architecture of the human mind itself, an architecture which curiously hap-



pens to be best reproduced in the structure of Hollywood movies. The basic model resembles a version of Eco's semiotic fractal (a Greimassian semiotic square each of whose corners is another such square, and so on to an arbitrary level of recursion), in which is inscribed a tetrad of tetrads of tetrads of tetrads to yield 256 root terms that can permute and combine according to set transformational rules. Having diligently avoided researching their theory in, say, Kim Stanley Robinson, the authors have a bit of trouble explaining this in any known human language, and include what in the hard edition is a closely-typeset 54-page glossary of jargon from "Ability" to "Z-term," remapping everyday words whose meaning you thought you knew into an unearthly Anglo-Martian creole. But though it's clear within a few pages that the authors are quite barking, it's only at the end that you learn that what you've been reading is in fact just the special version of a general theory called MENTAL RELATIVITY that can explain not only *Jurassic Park* but such disparate phenomena as Music, Personal Problem Solving, Quantum Physics, DNA, "Social Systems/Trends" ("All large scale patterns that ebb and flow come into greater focus through frictal [*sic*] ordering"), and even Astrophysics ("Black holes and Quasars can be modeled in great detail using the same processes that describe the mental acceptance of givens in relationship to spontaneous creative thought"). Exploring the links to Phillips's own website, where there's a lot more of this stuff, is recommended only for the seasoned anthropologist and those in search of further reassurance that they really

don't want to live in California.

Now, the *Dramatica* software package has been quite a successful product, and while I'd kill to know which films, if any, have actually been crafted with the assistance of "frictal ordering," that's not the principal point. Rather, this kind of mystagogic farrago of movie culture, pop science, and self-help psychobabel is a fairly representative example of how completely the southern Californian mind-set that originates the films we watch has been taken over by the red planet. And while it would be naive to blame any one event, however massive, the day the main Martian invasion force landed was surely on or close to the release date of the movie that *Dramatica* leans on as its prime paradigm text: May 25th 1977, the day a barely-articulate filmschool graduate turned sleeper hitmaker came up with a formula to turn pulp into gold, using no more sophisticated ingredients than a splash of Joseph Campbell and a lot of other people's movies.

It goes without saying, whatever George Lucas himself opined about mythic archetypes, there never was any philosopher's stone (as proved by his own attempt in *Willow* to demonstrate that there was). The strengths and weaknesses of *Star Wars*, rather, were entirely those of its idiosyncratic maker. As its hero's forename declares, *Star Wars* was a nakedly autobiographical movie, the war between the Empire and the rebel alliance an uncomfortably frank depiction of how the young Lucas saw the relationship between the Hollywood studio establishment and his own tight-knit circle of filmschool-trained freedom fighters. But Lucas's kinship with his hero extends many levels beyond the merely onomastic and allegorical: his preference for contemplation over leadership and technology over people; his high valuation of friendship and loyalty, coupled with a sense of juniority and awkwardness among his peers; his easy susceptibility to mentors and gurus.

The irony is that, over the 20 years that separates *Episode IV: A New Hope* from its prequels, the young Jedi swashbuckler who promised so much has himself withered into a Ben Kenobi: a grizzled recluse in his wilderness retreat, his sword of light and energy sheathed and almost forgotten since he was known the galaxy over as the most dazzling of the onemighty brotherhood of movie brats. (Now there's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time.) We're promised one last, late display of the one-time master's prowess in a return to arms in the autumn of our year; but it's no secret that even there he is destined to vacate his robes at the end of the first of the trilogy, and that in the sequels he will be content to hover attentively around his pupils issuing

slabs of advice from some kind of sparkly limbo. Let's hope they complete the training.

In the meantime, as the most lavish trailer in history, we have the "Special Editions" – whose specialness owes far less to their few minutes of new or reconstituted screen time than to the simple fact of being watched in a world 14 to 20 years different from the one for which they were originally made. In particular, though the revolution Lucas founded in the technology and aesthetics of spectacle continues undiminished, the trilogy's actual content is, like their setting, so long ago and far away as to seem deceptively futuristic. Space movies have been and long since gone; the trilogy returns to a generation for whom this kind of starscape backdrop is, outside the *Star Trek* franchise, almost as unfamiliar on the large screen as it was in 1977. And thanks to a fiercely ingenious pattern of releases and programme times, you can experience the whole would-be epic cycle back-to-back in a day.

In the event, it's an uncomfortable reunion. Though the first instalment retains a kind of gangly charm, the sequels don't hold up at all well, with their tiresome first-act plot detours and very dull middle sections faffing around in forests (it's painful to be reminded how much of *Empire Strikes Back* consisted of Luke doing handstands and levitating); their pompous mysticism, queasy militarism, and fetishization of martial arts; the many pointless and ill-timed revelations of kinship; the gruesome sparkly comebacks of loved ones who died in the Force; and the inordinate abundance of Harry Corbett moments to minimize subtlety ("What's that, R2/Chewie/...? You want to play your xylophone?"). The moments of sublimity remain those where Lucas's cinema abandons the pretence of human content and comes closest to a kind of computer-game abstraction; the raid on the Deathstar and the speeder-bike chase through the woods stand up surprisingly well in the Nintendo 64 era, and would probably have done so even without the Special Edition touchups to both. Certainly the most effective overhauls tend to be the ones you don't notice: the remastered soundtrack and small tweaks to effects sequences, rather than the jarring restored scenes and flashy CG additions. It's unfortunate that computer effects are, like-for-like, at a cruder stage in 1997 than miniatures, matte shots, and special makeup were in 1977; the new sequences look wobbly, show joins (especially in poor texture and movement matches), and in 20 years' time will have dated far more visibly than the footage they displace.

The main pleasures of the Special Editions, rather, are those of hindsight, perspective, and distance. It's mesmerizing now to watch what is

surely the worst cast ever assembled in a milestone movie trying to cope with what is certainly the most unspeakable dialogue, especially under a director of legendary communicative impairment whose difficulties with those parts of the job that involved human beings were already notorious. Hamill learns fastest, and is already getting quite professional in *Empire Strikes Back*, no doubt in part because his character is allowed to age; Ford, who remained pretty dire until well into the mid-1980s, struggles manfully in the sequels with a miscast and diabolically-written role, but the best that can be said for poor Carrie Fisher is that after the first instalment she was in a position to explore more suitable career options (not to say fast-track chemical remedies for puppy fat).

But the thing that strikes most about the trilogy 20 years on is the astonishing conservatism of its attempt to imagine the cosmos. For one thing, there are no real alien landscapes. Not only do the settings remain resolutely terrestrial, but even the European and African sequences in Episodes IV-V could as easily have been shot in California, because this is one of those galactic panoramas in which there are only three kinds of planet: "desert worlds," "forest worlds" and "ice worlds." Nor, despite some attractively-expanded cityscapes, is there any real alien culture. Alien music just sounds like bad west-coast fusion with synthesized reeds and the occasional non-Western scale note, while any actual multi-ethnicity is confined to liminal places of danger and threat like dodgy cantinas and Jabba's lair. Notoriously, the only character of colour in Episode IV was added in the Special Edition, while even the "alien" life forms are themselves overwhelmingly anthropomorphic, confined in effect to three basic types: humans in latex heads, humans in furry suits, and muppets. And the one laborious exception, the designedly repulsive Jabba, himself salivates his sexual glands with underclad Caucasian-human dancing girls rather than (say) lady slugs, Han Solo, or a puffer fish crossed with a Black & Decker Workmate; while even the most ambitious screen images are neutered and refamiliarized by John Williams's perversely-traditional orchestral score, which hasn't aged at all well.

It would be easy to charge *Star*

Wars itself with massive failure of imaginative nerve, and with ensuring that the very space-movie genre it spawned in the short term would be short-lived, vapid and swiftly forgotten, when in another universe we might instead have had 20 years of visionary uplift and Harrison Ford might have gone on to develop his relationship with wood in other, quieter ways. But a surer reason why space opera has all but vanished from cinema, while simultaneously thriving in a crude way on television, is that the school of grand sf that Aldiss called "widescreen baroque" is intrinsically novelistic. Whatever an interplanetary culture might be like, whether in this galaxy's future or a very long time ago in one far away, it's guaranteed to be very, very complex,

whereas the defining feature of popular cinema is that it's childishly simplistic, formulaic, conservative and mechanical. In a long-lived, multi-series run of hour-long TV dramas, backed up with a planetary empire of merchandising spinoffs, it's just about possible to manage enough sweep, intricacy, and arc to approximate the feeling you get from a page or two of middle-quality Jack Vance.

To attempt anything even modestly similar on film, as Lucas recognized from the start, would need at least nine films, a minimum of 25 years to complete, and the most successful film in history to lift the whole enterprise into orbit in the first place. And even then it's doubtful how far the end product would be worth it. The *Back to the Future* trilogy showed that an ambitious sf-movie arc can in principle be sustained, albeit at a level well below the epic, so long as you can depend – as the *Star Wars* sequence so painfully couldn't – on great plotting, a strong cast, snappy dialogue, funny jokes and back-to-back production.

All in all, it's hard to see much ground for new hope in episode IV. There's no doubting that *Star Wars* made some extraordinary things possible, most of which still haven't actually happened. But the legacy of Lucas also includes a culture of belief that there are shortcuts: that, if you just complete the training and master the ways of the Theory, you can stretch people's imaginations without needing to be interested in anything but movies, new-age bollockspeak, and yourself. Only in California, you say. I just hope.

Nick Lowe



ROUTE

Peter F. Hamilton

Marcus Calvert had never seen an asteroid cavern quite like Sonora's before; it was disorientating even for someone who had spent 30 years captaining a starship. The centre of the gigantic rock had been hollowed out by mining machines, producing a cylindrical cavity twelve kilometres long, five in diameter. Usually, the floor would be covered in soil and planted with fruit trees and grass. In Sonora's case, the environmental engineers had simply flooded it. The result was a small freshwater sea that no matter where you were on it, you appeared to be at the bottom of a valley of water.

Floating around the grey surface were innumerable rafts, occupied by hotels, bars, and restaurants. Taxi boats whizzed between them and the wharfs at the base of the two flat cavern walls.

Marcus and two of his crew had taken a boat out to the Lomaz bar, a raft which resembled a Chinese dragon trying to mate with a Mississippi paddle steamer.

"Any idea what our charter is, Captain?" asked Katherine Maddox, the *Lady Macbeth's* node specialist.

"The agent didn't say," Marcus admitted. "Apart from confirming it's private, not corporate."

"They don't want us for combat, do they?" Katherine asked. There was a hint of rebellion in her voice. She was in her late 40s, and like the Calverts her family had geneered their offspring to withstand both freefall and high acceleration. The dominant modifications had given her thicker skin, tougher bones, and harder internal membranes; she was never sick or giddy in freefall, nor did her face bloat up. Such changes were a formula for blunt features, and Katherine was no exception.

"If they do, we're not taking it," Marcus assured her.

Katherine exchanged an unsettled glance with Roman Zucker, the ship's fusion engineer, and slumped back in her chair.

The combat option was one Marcus had considered possible. *Lady Macbeth* was combat-capable, and Sonora asteroid belonged to a Lagrange-point cluster with a strong

autonomy movement. An unfortunate combination. But having passed his 67th birthday two months ago he sincerely hoped those kind of flights were behind him.

"This could be them," Roman said, glancing over the rail. One of Sonora's little taxi boats was approaching their big resort raft.

The trim cutter curving round towards the Lomaz had two people sitting on its red leather seats.

Marcus watched with interest as they left the taxi. He ordered his neural nanonics to open a fresh memory cell, and stored the pair of them in a visual file. The first to alight was a man in his mid-30s, dressed in expensive casual clothes; a long face and a very broad nose gave him a kind of imposing dignity.

His partner was less flamboyant. She was in her late 20s, obviously geneered; Oriental features matched with white hair that had been drawn together in wide dreadlocks and folded back aerodynamically.

They walked straight over to Marcus's table, and introduced themselves as Antonio Ribeiro and Victoria Keef. Antonio clicked his fingers at the waitress, and told her to fetch a bottle of Norfolk Tears.

"Hopefully to celebrate the success of our business venture, my friends," he said. "And if not, it is a pleasant time of day to imbibe such a magical potion. No?"

Marcus found himself immediately distrustful. It wasn't just Antonio's phoney attitude; his intuition was scratching away at the back of his skull. Some friends called it his paranoia programme, but it was rarely wrong. A family trait, like the wanderlust which no geneering treatment had ever eradicated.

"The cargo agent said you had a charter for us," Marcus said. "He never mentioned any sort of business deal."

"If I may ask your indulgence for a moment, Captain Calvert. You arrived here without a cargo. You must be a very rich man to afford that."

"There were... circumstances requiring us to leave Ayachcho ahead of schedule."

"Yeah," Katherine muttered darkly. "Her husband."

Marcus was expecting it, and smiled serenely. He'd heard very little else from the crew for the whole flight.

Antonio received the tray and its precious pear-shaped bottle from the waitress, and waved away the change.

"If I may be indelicate, Captain, your financial resources are not optimal at this moment," Antonio suggested.

"They've been better."

Antonio sipped his Norfolk Tears, and grinned in appreciation. "For myself, I was born with the wrong amount of money. Enough to know I needed more."

"Mr Ribeiro, I've heard all the get-rich-quick schemes in existence. They all have one thing in common, they don't work. If they did, I wouldn't be sitting here with you."

"You are wise to be cautious, Captain. I was, too, when I first heard this proposal. However, if you would humour me a moment longer, I can assure you this requires no capital outlay on your part. At the worst you will have another mad scheme to laugh about with your fellow captains."

"No money at all?"

"None at all, simply the use of your ship. We would be equal partners sharing whatever reward we find."

"Jesus. All right, I can spare you five minutes. Your drink has bought you that much attention span."

"Thank you, Captain. My colleagues and I want to fly the *Lady Macbeth* on a prospecting mission."

"For planets?" Roman asked curiously.

"No. Sadly, the discovery of a terracompatible planet does not guarantee wealth. Settlement rights will not bring more than a couple of million fuseodollars, and even that is dependant on a favourable biospectrum assessment, which would take many years. We have something more immediate in mind. You have just come from the Dorados?"

"That's right," Marcus said. The system had been discovered six years earlier, comprising a red dwarf sun surrounded by a vast disc of rocky particles. Several of the larger chunks had turned out to be nearly pure metal. Dorados was an obvious name; whoever managed to develop them would gain a colossal economic resource. So much so that the governments of Omuta and Garissa had gone to war over who had that development right.

It was the Garissan survivors who had ultimately been awarded settlement by the Confederation Assembly. There weren't many of them. Omuta had deployed twelve anti-matter planetbusters against their homeworld. "Is that what you're hoping to find, another flock of solid metal asteroids?"

"Not quite," Antonio said. "Companies have been searching similar disc systems ever since the Dorados were discovered, to no avail. Victoria, my dear, if you would care to explain."

She nodded curtly and put her glass down on the table. "I'm an astrophysicist by training," she said. "I used to work for Forrester-Courtney; it's a company based in the O'Neill Halo that manufactures starship sensors, although their speciality is survey probes. It's been a very healthy business recently. Consortiums have been flying survey missions through every catalogued disc system in the Confederation. As Antonio said, none of our clients found anything remotely like the Dorados. That didn't surprise me, I never expected any of Forrester-Courtney's probes to be of much use. All our sensors did was run broad spectrographic sweeps. If anyone was going to find another Dorados cluster it would be the Edenists. Their voidhawks have a big advantage; those ships generate an enormous distortion field which can literally see

mass. A lump of metal 50 kilometres across would have a very distinct density signature; they'd be aware of it from at least half a million kilometres away. If we were going to compete against that, we'd need a sensor which gave us the same level of results, if not better."

"And you produced one?" Marcus enquired.

"Not quite. I proposed expanding our magnetic anomaly detector array. It's a very ancient technology; Earth's old nations pioneered it during the 20th century. Their military maritime aircraft were equipped with crude arrays to track enemy submarines. Forrester-Courtney builds its array into low-orbit resource-mapping satellites; they produce quite valuable survey data. Unfortunately, the company turned down my proposal. They said an expanded magnetic array wouldn't produce better results than a spectrographic sweep, not on the scale required. And a spectrographic scan would be quicker."

"Unfortunate for Forrester-Courtney," Antonio said wolfishly. "Not for us. Dear Victoria came to me with her suggestion, and a simple observation."

"A spectrographic sweep will only locate relatively large pieces of mass," she said. "Fly a starship 50 million kilometres above a disc, and it can spot a 50-kilometre lump of solid metal easily. But the smaller the lump, the higher the resolution you need or the closer you have to fly, a fairly obvious equation. My magnetic anomaly detector can pick out much smaller lumps of metal than a Dorado."

"So? If they're smaller, they're worth less," Katherine said. "The whole point of the Dorados is that they're huge. I've seen the operation those ex-Garissans are building up. They've got enough metal to supply their industrial stations with specialist microgee alloys for the next 2,000 years. Small is no good."

"Not necessarily," Marcus said carefully. Maybe it was his intuition again, or just plain logical extrapolation, but he could see the way Victoria Keef's thoughts were flowing. "It depends on what kind of small, doesn't it?"

Antonio applauded. "Excellent, Captain. I knew you were the right man for us."

"What makes you think they're there?" Marcus asked.

"The Dorados are the ultimate proof of concept," Victoria said. "There are two possible origins for disc material around stars. The first is accretion; matter left over from the star's formation. That's no use to us, it's mostly the light elements, carbonaceous chondritic particles with some silica aluminium thrown in if you're lucky. The second type of disc is made up out of collision debris. We believe that's what the Dorados are, fragments of planetoids that were large enough to form molten metal cores. When they broke apart the metal cooled and congealed into those hugely valuable chunks."

"But nickel iron wouldn't be the only metal," Marcus reasoned, pleased by the way he was following through. "There will be other chunks floating about in the disc."

"Exactly, Captain," Antonio said eagerly. "Theoretically, the whole periodic table will be available to us, we can fly above the disc and pick out whatever element we require. There will be no tedious and expensive refining process to extract it from ore. It's there waiting for us in its purest form; gold, silver, platinum, iridium. Whatever takes your fancy."



Lady Macbeth sat on a docking cradle in Sonora's spaceport, a simple dull-grey sphere 57 metres in diameter. All Adamist

starships shared the same geometry, dictated by the operating parameters of the ZTT jump, which required perfect symmetry. At her heart were four separate life-support capsules, arranged in a pyramid formation; there was also a cylindrical hangar for her spaceplane, a smaller one for her Multiple Service Vehicle, and five main cargo holds. The rest of her bulk was a solid intestinal tangle of machinery and tanks. Her main drive system was three fusion rockets capable of accelerating her at eleven gees, clustered round an antimatter intermix tube which could multiply that figure by an unspecified amount; a sure sign of her combat-capable status. (By a legislative quirk it wasn't actually illegal to have an antimatter drive, though possession of antimatter itself was a capital crime throughout the Confederation.)

Spaceport umbilical hoses were jacked into sockets on her lower hull, supplying basic utility functions. Another expense Marcus wished he could avoid; it was inflicting further pain on his already ailing cash-flow situation. They were going to have to fly soon, and fate seemed to have decided what flight it would be. That hadn't stopped his intuition from maintaining its subliminal assault on Antonio Ribeiro's scheme. If he could just find a single practical or logical argument against it...

He waited patiently while the crew drifted into the main lounge in life-support capsule A. Wai Choi, the spaceplane pilot, came down through the ceiling hatch and used a stikpad to anchor her shoes to the decking. She gave Marcus a sly smile that bordered on teasing. There had been times in the last five years when she'd joined him in his cabin, nothing serious, but they'd certainly had their moments. Which, he supposed, made her more tolerant of him than the others.

At the opposite end of the spectrum was Karl Jordan, the *Lady Mac*'s systems specialist, with the shortest temper, the greatest enthusiasm, and certainly the most serious of the crew. His age was the reason, only 25; the *Lady Mac* was his second starship duty.

As for Schutz, who knew what emotions were at play in the cosmonik's mind; there was no visible outlet for them. Unlike Marcus, he hadn't been geneered for freefall; decades of working on ships and spaceport docks had seen his bones lose calcium, his muscles waste away, and his cardiovascular system atrophy. There were hundreds like him in every asteroid, slowly replacing their body parts with mechanical substitutes. Some even divested themselves of their human shape altogether. At 63, Schutz was still humanoid, though only 20 per cent of him was biological. His body supplements made him an excellent engineer.

"We've been offered a joint-prize flight," Marcus told them. He explained Victoria's theory about disc systems and the magnetic anomaly array. "Ribeiro will provide us with consumables and a full cryogenics load. All we have to do is take *Lady Mac* to a disc system and scoop up the gold."

"There has to be a catch," Wai said. "I don't believe in mountains of gold just drifting through space waiting for us to come along and find them."

"Believe it," Roman said. "You've seen the Dorados. Why can't other elements exist in the same way?"

"I don't know. I just don't think anything comes that easy." "Always the pessimist."

"What do you think, Marcus?" she asked. "What does your intuition tell you?"

"About the mission, nothing. I'm more worried about Antonio Ribeiro."

"Definitely suspect," Katherine agreed.

"Being a total prat is socially unfortunate," Roman said. "But it's not a crime. Besides, Victoria Keef seemed level-headed enough."

"An odd combination," Marcus mused. "A wannabe playboy and an astrophysicist. I wonder how they ever got together."

"They're both Sonora nationals," Katherine said. "I ran a check through the public data cores, they were born here. It's not that remarkable."

"Any criminal record?" Wai asked.

"None listed. Antonio has been in court three times in the last seven years; each case was over disputed taxes. He paid every time."

"So he doesn't like the tax man," Roman said. "That makes him one of the good guys."

"Run-ins with the tax office are standard for the rich," Wai said.

"Except he's not actually all that rich," Katherine said. "I also queried the local Collins Media library; they keep tabs on Sonora's principal citizens. Mr Ribeiro senior made his money out of fish breeding, he won the franchise from the asteroid development corporation to keep the biosphere sea stocked. Antonio was given a 15 per cent stake in the breeding company when he was 21, which he promptly sold for an estimated 800,000 fuseodollars. Daddy didn't approve, there are several news files on the quarrel; it became very public."

"So he is what he claims to be," Roman said. "A not-very rich boy with expensive tastes."

"How can he pay for the magnetic detectors we have to deploy, then?" Wai asked. "Or is he going to hit us with the bill and suddenly vanish?"

"The detector arrays are already waiting to be loaded on board," Marcus said. "Antonio has several partners; people in the same leaky boat as himself, and willing to take a gamble."

Wai shook her head, still dubious. "I don't buy it. It's a free lunch."

"They're willing to invest their own money in the array hardware. What other guarantees do you want?"

"What kind of money are we talking about, exactly?" Karl asked. "I mean, if we do fill the ship up, what's it going to be worth?"

"Given its density, *Lady Mac* can carry roughly 5,000 tonnes of gold in her cargo holds," Marcus said. "That'll make manoeuvring very sluggish, but I can handle her."

Roman grinned at Karl. "And today's price for gold is three and a half thousand fuseodollars per kilogram."

Karl's eyes went blank for a second as his neural nanonics ran the conversion. "Seventeen billion fuseodollars worth!" He laughed. "Per trip."

"How is this Ribeiro character proposing to divide the proceeds?" Schutz asked.

"We get one third," Marcus said. "Roughly five point eight billion fuseodollars. Of which I take 30 per cent. The rest is split equally between you, as per the bounty flight clause in your contracts."

"Shit," Karl whispered. "When do we leave, Captain?"

"Does anybody have any objections?" Marcus asked. He gave Wai a quizzical look.

"Okay," she said. "But just because you can't see surface cracks, it doesn't mean there isn't any metal fatigue."

The docking cradle lifted *Lady Macbeth* cleanly out of the spaceport's crater-shaped bay. As soon as she cleared the rim her thermo-dump panels unfolded, sensor clusters rose up out of their recesses on long booms. Visual and radar information was collated by the flight computer, which datavised it directly into Marcus's neural nanonics. He lay on the acceleration couch at the centre of the bridge with his eyes closed as the external starfield blossomed in his mind. Delicate icons unfurled across the visualization, ship status schematics and navigational plots sketched in primary colours.

Chemical verniers fired, lifting *Lady Mac* off the cradle amid spumes of hot saffron vapour. A tube of orange circles appeared ahead of him, the course vector formatted to take them in towards the gas giant. Marcus switched to the more powerful ion thrusters, and the orange circles began to stream past the hull.

The gas giant, Zacateca, and its moon, Lazaro, had the same apparent size as *Lady Mac* accelerated away from the spaceport. Sonora was one of 15 asteroids captured by their Lagrange point, a zone where their respective gravity fields were in equilibrium. Behind the starship, Lazaro was a grubby grey crescent splattered with white craters. Given that Zacateca was small for a gas giant, barely 40,000 kilometres in diameter, Lazaro was an unusual companion. A moon 9,000 kilometres in diameter, with an outer crust of ice 50 kilometres deep. It was that ice which had originally attracted the interest of the banks and multistellar finance consortia. Stony iron asteroids were an ideal source of metal and minerals for industrial stations, but they were also notoriously short of the light elements essential to sustain life. To have abundant supplies of both so close together was a strong investment incentive.

Lady Mac's radar showed Marcus a serpentine line of one-tonne ice cubes flung out from Lazaro's equatorial mass-driver, gliding inertly up to the Lagrange point for collection. The same inexhaustible source which allowed Sonora to have its unique sea.

All the asteroids in the cluster had benefited from the plentiful ice, their economic growth racing ahead of equivalent settlements. Such success always bred resentment among the indigenous population, who inevitably became eager for freedom from the founding companies. In this case, having so many settlements so close together gave their population a strong sense of identity and shared anger. The cluster's demands for autonomy had become increasingly strident over the last few years. A situation agitated by numerous violent incidents and acts of sabotage against the company administration staff.

Ahead of the *Lady Mac*, Marcus could see the tidal hurricane Lazaro stirred up amid the wan amber and emerald stormbands of Zacateca's upper atmosphere. An ocean-sized hypervelocity maelstrom which followed the moon's orbit faithfully around the equator. Lightning crackled round its fringes, 500-kilometre-long forks stabbing out into the surrounding cyclones of ammonia cirrus and methane sleet.

The starship was accelerating at two gees now, her triple fusion drives sending out a vast streamer of arc-bright plasma as she curved around the bulk of the huge planet. Her course vector was slowly bending to align on the star which Antonio intended to prospect, 38 light years distant. There was very little information contained in the almanac file other than confirming it was a K class star with a disc.

Marcus cut the fusion drives when the *Lady Mac* was 7,000 kilometres past perigee and climbing steadily. The

thermo-dump panels and sensor clusters sank down into their jump recesses below the fuselage, returning the ship to a perfect sphere. Fusion generators began charging the energy patterning nodes. Orange circles flashing through Marcus's mind were illustrating the slingshot parabola she'd flown, straightening up the further the gas giant was left behind. A faint star slid into the last circle.

An event horizon swallowed the starship. Five milliseconds later it had shrunk to nothing.



"Okay, try this one," Katherine said. "Why should the gold or anything else congeal into lumps as big as the ones they say it will? Just because you've got a planetoid with a hot core doesn't mean it's producing the metallic equivalent of fractional distillation. You're not going to get an onion-layer effect with strata of different metals. It doesn't happen on planets, it won't happen here. If there is gold, and platinum and all the rest of this fantasy junk, it's going to be hidden away in ores just like it always is."

"So Antonio exaggerated when he said it would be pure," Karl retorted. "We just hunt down the highest grade ore particles in the disc. Even if it's only 50 per cent, who cares? We're never going to be able to spend it all anyway."

Marcus let the discussion grumble on. It had been virtually the only topic for the crew since they'd departed Sonora five days ago. Katherine was playing the part of chief sceptic, with occasional support from Schutz and Wai; while the others tried to shoot her down. The trouble was, he acknowledged, that none of them knew enough to comment with real authority. At least they weren't talking about the sudden departure from Ayachcho any more.

"If the planetoids did produce ore, then it would fragment badly during the collision which formed the disc," Katherine said. "There won't even be any mountain-sized chunks left, only pebbles."

"Have you taken a look outside recently?" Roman asked. "The disc doesn't exactly have a shortage of large particles."

Marcus smiled to himself at that. The disc material had worried him when they arrived at the star two days ago. *Lady Mac* had jumped deep into the system, emerging three million kilometres above the ecliptic. It was a superb vantage point. The small orange star burned at the centre of a disc 160 million kilometres in diameter. There were no distinct bands like those found in a gas giant's rings, this was a continuous grainy copper mist veiling half of the universe. Only around the star itself did it fade away; whatever particles were there to start with had long since evaporated to leave a clear band three million kilometres wide above the turbulent photosphere.

Lady Mac was accelerating away from the star at a 20th of a gee, and curving round into a retrograde orbit. It was the vector which would give the magnetic arrays the best possible coverage of the disc. Unfortunately, it increased the probability of collision by an order of magnitude. So far, the radar had only detected standard motes of interplanetary dust, but Marcus insisted there were always two crew on duty monitoring the local environment.

"Time for another launch," he announced.

Wai datavised the flight computer to run a final systems diagnostic through the array satellite. "I notice Jorge isn't here again," she said sardonically. "I wonder why that is?"

Jorge Leon was the second companion Antonio Ribeiro had brought with him on the flight. He'd been introduced

to the crew as a first-class hardware technician who had supervised the construction of the magnetic array satellites. As introverted as Antonio was outgoing, he'd shown remarkably little interest in the arrays so far. It was Victoria Keef who'd familiarized the crew with the systems they were deploying.

"We should bung him in our medical scanner," Karl suggested cheerfully. "Be interesting to see what's inside him. Bet you'd find a whole load of weapon implants."

"Great idea," Roman said. "You ask him. He gives me the creeps."

"Yeah, Katherine, explain that away," Karl said. "If there's no gold in the disc, how come they brought a contract killer along to make sure we don't fly off with their share?"

"Karl!" Marcus warned. "That's enough." He gave the open floor hatch a pointed look. "Now let's get the array launched, please."

Karl's face reddened as he began establishing a tracking link between the starship's communication system and the array satellite's transponder.

"Satellite systems on line," Wai reported. "Launch when ready."

Marcus datavised the flight computer to retract the satellite's hold-down latches. An induction rail shot it clear of the ship. Ion thrusters flared, refining its trajectory as it headed down towards the squally apricot surface of the disc.



Victoria had designed the satellites to skim 5,000 kilometres above the nomadic particles. When their operational altitude was established they would spin up and start to reel out 25 gossamer-thin optical fibres. Rotation insured the fibres remained straight, forming a spoke array parallel to the disc. Each fibre was 150 kilometres long, and coated in a reflective, magnetically-sensitive film.

As the disc particles were still within the star's magnetosphere, every one of them generated a tiny wake as it traversed the flux lines. It was that wake which resonated the magnetically-sensitive film, producing fluctuations in the reflectivity. By bouncing a laser pulse down the fibre and measuring the distortions inflicted by the film, it was possible to build up an image of the magnetic waves writhing chaotically through the disc. With the correct discrimination programmes, the origin of each wave could be determined.

The amount of data streaming back into the *Lady Macbeth* from the array satellites was colossal. One satellite array could cover an area of 250,000 square kilometres, and Antonio Ribeiro had persuaded the Sonora Autonomy Crusade to pay for 15. It was a huge gamble, and the responsibility was his alone. Forty hours after the first satellite was deployed, the strain of that responsibility was beginning to show. He hadn't slept since then, choosing to stay in the cabin which Marcus Calvert had assigned to them, and where they'd set up their network of analysis processors. Forty hours of his mind being flooded with near-incomprehensible neuroiconic displays. Forty hours spent fingering his silver crucifix and praying.

The medical monitor programme running in his neural nanonics was flashing up fatigue toxin cautions, and warning him of impending dehydration. So far he'd ignored them, telling himself discovery would occur any minute now. In his heart, Antonio had been hoping they would

find what they wanted in the first five hours.

His neural nanonics informed him the analysis network was focusing on the mass density ratio of a three-kilometre particle exposed by satellite seven. The processors began a more detailed interrogation of the raw data.

"What is it?" Antonio demanded. His eyes fluttered open to glance at Victoria who was resting lightly on one of the cabin's flatchairs.

"Interesting," she murmured. "It appears to be a casiterite ore. The planetoids definitely had tin."

"Shit!" He thumped his fist into the chair's padding, only to feel the restraint straps tighten against his chest, preventing him from sailing free. "I don't care about tin. That's not what we're here for."

"I am aware of that." Her eyes were open, staring at him with a mixture of contempt and anger.

"Sure, sure," he mumbled. "Holy Mother, you'd expect us to find some by now."

"Careful," she datavised. "Remember this damn ship has internal sensors."

"I know how to follow elementary security procedures," he datavised back.

"Yes. But you're tired. That's when errors creep in."

"I'm not that tired. Shit, I expected results by now; some progress."

"We have had some very positive results, Antonio. The arrays have found three separate deposits of pitchblende."

"Yeah, in hundred-kilogram lumps. We need more than that, a lot more."

"You're missing the point. We've proved it exists here; that's a stupendous discovery. Finding it in quantity is just a matter of time."

"This isn't some astrological experiment you're running for that university which threw you out. We're on an assignment for the cause. And we cannot go back empty handed. Got that? Cannot."

"Astrophysics."

"What?"

"You said astrological, that's fortune-telling."

"Yeah? You want I should take a guess at how much future you're going to have if we don't find what we need out here?"

"For Christ's sake, Antonio," she said out loud. "Go and get some sleep."

"Maybe." He scratched the side of his head, unhappy with how limp and oily his hair had become. A vapour shower was something else he hadn't had for a while. "I'll get Jorge in here to help you monitor the results."

"Great." Her eyes closed again.

Antonio deactivated his flatchair's restraint straps. He hadn't seen much of Jorge on the flight. Nobody had. The man kept strictly to himself in his small cabin. The Crusade's council wanted him on board to ensure the crew's continuing cooperation once they realized there was no gold. It was Antonio who had suggested the arrangement; what bothered him was the orders Jorge had received concerning himself should things go wrong.

"Hold it." Victoria raised her hand. "This is a really weird one."

Antonio tapped his feet on a stikpad to steady himself. His neural nanonics accessed the analysis network again. Satellite eleven had located a particle with an impossible mass-density ratio; it also had its own magnetic field, a very complex one. "Holy Mother, what is that? Is there

another ship here?"

"No, it's too big for a ship. Some kind of station, I suppose. But what's it doing in the disc?"

"Refining ore?" he said with a strong twist of irony.

"I doubt it."

"Okay. So forget it."

"You are joking."

"No. If it doesn't affect us, it doesn't concern us."

"Jesus, Antonio; if I didn't know you were born rich I'd be frightened by how stupid you were."

"Be careful, Victoria my dear. Very careful."

"Listen, there's two options. One, it's some kind of commercial operation; which must be illegal because nobody has filed for industrial development rights." She gave him a significant look.

"You think they're mining pitchblende?" he datavised.

"What else? We thought of the concept, why not one of the black syndicates as well? They just didn't come up with my magnetic array idea, so they're having to do it the hard way."

"Secondly," she continued aloud, "it's some kind of covert military station; in which case they've tracked us from the moment we emerged. Either way, we're under observation. We have to know who they are before we proceed any further."



"A station?" Marcus asked. "Here?"

"It would appear so," Antonio said glumly.

"And you want us to find out who they are?"

"I think that would be prudent," Victoria said, "Given what we're doing here."

"All right," Marcus said. "Karl, lock a communication dish on them. Give them our CAB identification code, let's see if we can get a response."

"Aye, sir," Karl said. He settled back on his acceleration couch.

"While we're waiting," Katherine said. "I have a question for you Antonio."

She ignored the warning glare Marcus directed at her.

Antonio's bogus smile blinked on. "If it is one I can answer, then I will do so gladly, dear lady."

"Gold is expensive because of its rarity value, right?"

"Of course."

"So here we are, about to fill *Lady Mac*'s cargo holds with 5,000 tonnes of the stuff. On top of that you've developed a method which means people can scoop up millions of tonnes any time they want. If we try and sell it to a dealer or a bank, how long do you think we're going to be billionaires for, a fortnight?"

Antonio laughed. "Gold has never been that rare. Its value is completely artificial. The Edenists have the largest stockpile. We don't know exactly how much they possess because the Jovian Bank will not declare the exact figure. But they dominate the commodity market, and sustain the price by controlling how much is released. We shall simply play the same game. Our gold will have to be sold discreetly, in small batches, in different star systems, and over the course of several years. And knowledge of the magnetic array system should be kept to ourselves."

"Nice try, Katherine," Roman chuckled. "You'll just have to settle for an income of a hundred million a year."

She showed him a stiff finger, backed by a shark's smile.

"No response," Karl said. "Not even a transponder."

"Keep trying," Marcus told him. "Okay, Antonio, what

do you want to do about it?"

"We have to know who they are," Victoria said. "As Antonio has just explained so eloquently, we can't have other people seeing what we're doing here."

"It's what *they're* doing here that worries me," Marcus said; although, curiously, his intuition wasn't causing him any grief on the subject.

"I see no alternative but a rendezvous," Antonio said.

"We're in a retrograde orbit, 32 million kilometres away and receding. That's going to use up an awful lot of fuel."

"Which I believe I have already paid for."

"Okay, we rendezvous."

"What if they don't want us there?" Schutz asked.

"If we detect any combat wasp launch, then we jump outsystem immediately," Marcus said. "The disc's gravity field isn't strong enough to affect *Lady Mac*'s patterning node symmetry. We can leave any time we want."



For the last quarter of a million kilometres of the approach, Marcus put the ship on combat status. The nodes were fully charged, ready to jump. Thermo-dump panels were retracted. Sensors maintained a vigilant watch for approaching combat wasps.

"They must know we're here," Wai said when they were 8,000 kilometres away. "Why don't they acknowledge us?"

"Ask them," Marcus said sourly. *Lady Mac* was decelerating at a nominal one gee, which he was varying at random. It made their exact approach vector impossible to predict, which meant their course couldn't be seeded with proximity mines. The manoeuvre took a lot of concentration.

"Still no electromagnetic emission in any spectrum," Karl reported. "They're certainly not scanning us with active sensors."

"Sensors are picking up their thermal signature," Schutz said. "The structure is being maintained at 36 degrees Celsius."

"That's on the warm side," Katherine observed. "Perhaps their environmental system is malfunctioning."

"Shouldn't affect the transponder," Karl said.

"Captain, I think you'd better access the radar return," Schutz said.

Marcus boosted the fusion drives up to one and a half gees, and ordered the flight computer to datavise him the radar feed. The image which rose into his mind was of a fine scarlet mesh suspended in the darkness, its gentle ocean-swell pattern outlining the surface of the station and the disc particle it was attached to. Except Marcus had never seen any station like this before. It was a gently curved wedge-shape structure, 400 metres long, 300 wide, and 150 metres at its blunt end. The accompanying disc particle was a flattened ellipsoid of stony iron rock, measuring eight kilometres along its axis. The tip had been sheared off, leaving a flat cliff half a kilometre in diameter, to which the structure was clinging. That was the smallest of the particle's modifications. A crater four kilometres across, with perfectly smooth walls, had been cut into one side of the rock. An elaborate unicorn-horn tower rose 900 metres from its centre, ending in a clump of jagged spikes.

"Oh Jesus," Marcus whispered. Elation mingled with fear, producing a deviant adrenaline high. He smiled thinly. "How about that?"

"This was one option I didn't consider," Victoria said

weakly.

Antonio looked round the bridge, a frown cheapening his handsome face. The crew seemed dazed, while Victoria was grinning with delight. "Is it some kind of radio astronomy station?" he asked.

"Yes," Marcus said. "But not one of ours. We don't build like that. It's xenoc."

Lady Mac locked attitude a kilometre above the xenoc structure. It was a position which made the disc appear uncomfortably malevolent. The smallest particle beyond the fuselage must have massed over a million tonnes; and all of them were moving, a slow, random three-dimensional cruise of lethal inertia. Amber sunlight stained those near the disc's surface a baleful ginger, while deeper in there were only phantom silhouettes drifting over total blackness, flowing in and out of visibility. No stars were evident through the dark, tightly packed nebula.

"That's not a station," Roman declared. "It's a shipwreck."

Now that *Lady Mac*'s visual-spectrum sensors were providing them with excellent images of the xenoc structure, Marcus had to agree. The upper and lower surfaces of the wedge was some kind of silver-white material, a fuselage shell which was fraying away at the edges. Both of the side surfaces were dull brown, obviously interior bulkhead walls, with the black geometrical outline of decking printed across them. The whole structure was a cross-section torn out of a much larger craft. Marcus tried to fill in the missing bulk in his mind; it must have been vast, a streamlined delta fuselage like a hypersonic aircraft. Which didn't make sense for a starship. Rather, he corrected himself, for a starship built with current human technology. He wondered what it would be like to fly through interstellar space the way a plane flew through an atmosphere, swooping round stars at a hundred times the speed of light. Quite something.

"This doesn't make a lot of sense," Katherine said. "If they were visiting the telescope dish when they had the accident, why did they bother to anchor themselves to the asteroid? Surely they'd just take refuge in the operations centre."

"Only if there is one," Schutz said. "Most of our deep space science facilities are automated, and by the look of it their technology is considerably more advanced."

"If they are so advanced, why would they build a radio telescope on this scale anyway?" Victoria asked. "It's very impractical. Humans have been using linked baseline arrays for centuries. Five small dishes orbiting a million kilometres apart would provide a reception which is orders of magnitude greater than this. And why build it here? Firstly, the particles are hazardous, certainly to something that size. You can see it's been pocked by small impacts, and that horn looks broken to me. Secondly, the disc itself blocks half of the universe from observation. No, if you're going to do major radio astronomy, you don't do it from a star system like this one."

"Perhaps they were only here to build the dish," Wai said. "They intended it to be a remote research station in this part of the galaxy. Once they had it up and running, they'd boost it into a high-inclination orbit. They had their accident before the project was finished."

"That still doesn't explain why they chose this system. Any other star would be better than this one."

"I think Wai's right about them being long-range visitors," Marcus said. "If a xenoc race like that existed close to the Confederation we would have found them by now. Or they would have contacted us."

"The Kiint," Karl said quickly.

"Possibly," Marcus conceded. The Kiint were an enigmatic xenoc race, with a technology far in advance of anything the Confederation had mastered. However, they were reclusive, and cryptic to the point of obscurity. They also claimed to have abandoned starflight a long time ago. "If it is one of their ships, then it's very old."

"And it's still functional," Roman said eagerly. "Hell, think of the technology inside. We'll wind up a lot richer than the gold could ever make us." He grinned over at Antonio, whose humour had blackened considerably.

"So what were the Kiint doing building a radio telescope here?" Victoria asked.

"Who the hell cares?" Karl said. "I volunteer to go over, Captain."

Marcus almost didn't hear him. He'd accessed the *Lady Mac*'s sensor suite again, sweeping the focus over the tip of the dish's tower, then the sheer cliff which the wreckage was attached to. Intuition was making a lot of junctions in his head. "I don't think it is a radio telescope," he said. "I think it's a distress beacon."

"It's four kilometres across!" Katherine said.

"If they came from the other side of the galaxy, it would need to be. We can't even see the galactic core from here there's so much gas and dust in the way. You'd need something this big to punch a message through."

"That's valid," Victoria said. "You believe they were signalling their homeworld for help?"

"Yes. Assume their world is a long way off, three-four thousand light years away if not more. They were flying a research or survey mission in this area and they have an accident. Three quarters of their ship is lost, including the drive section. Their technology isn't good enough to build the survivors a working stardrive out of what's left, but they can enlarge an existing crater on the disc particle. So they do that; they build the dish and a transmitter powerful enough to give God an alarm call, point it at their homeworld, and scream for help. The ship can sustain them until the rescue team arrives. Even our own zero-tau technology is up to that."

"Gets my vote," Wai said, she gave Marcus a wink.

"No way," said Katherine. "If they were in trouble they'd use a supralight communicator to call for help. Look at that ship, we're centuries away from building anything like it."

"Edenist voidhawks are pretty sophisticated," Marcus countered. "We just scale things differently. These xenocs might have a more advanced technology, but physics is still the same the universe over. Our understanding of quantum relativity is good enough to build faster than light starships, yet after 450 years of theoretical research we still haven't come up with a method of supralight communication. It doesn't exist."

"If they didn't return on time, then surely their homeworld would send out a search and recovery craft," Schutz said.

"They'd have to know the original ship's course exactly," Wai said. "And if a search ship did manage to locate them, why did they build the dish?"

Marcus didn't say anything. He knew he was right. The others would accept his scenario eventually, they always did.

"All right, let's stop arguing about what happened to them, and why they built the dish," Karl said. "When do we go over there, Captain?"

"Have you forgotten the gold?" Antonio asked. "That is why we came to this disc system. We should resume our

search for it. This piece of wreckage can wait."

"Don't be crazy. This is worth a hundred times as much as any gold."

"I fail to see how. An ancient, derelict, starship with a few heating circuits operational. Come along. I've been reasonable indulging you, but we must return to the original mission."

Marcus regarded the man cautiously, a real bad feeling starting to develop. Anyone with the slightest knowledge of finance and the markets would know the value of salvaging a xenoc starship. And Antonio had been born rich. "Victoria," he said, not shifting his gaze. "Is the data from the magnetic array satellites still coming through?"

"Yes." She touched Antonio's arm. "The captain is right. We can continue to monitor the satellite results from here, and investigate the xenoc ship simultaneously."

"Double your money time," Katherine said with apparent innocence.

Antonio's face hardened. "Very well," he said curtly. "If that's your expert opinion, Victoria, my dear. Carry on by all means, Captain."



In its inert state the SII spacesuit was a broad sensor collar with a protruding respirator tube and a black football-sized globe of programmable silicon hanging from it. Marcus slipped the collar round his neck, bit on the tube nozzle, and datavised an activation code into the suit's control processor. The silicon ball began to change shape, flattening out against his chest, then flowing over his body like a tenacious oil slick. It enveloped his head completely, and the collar sensors replaced his eyes, datavisng their vision directly into his neural nanonics. Three others were in the preparation compartment with him; Schutz, who didn't need a spacesuit to EVA, Antonio, and Jorge Leon. Marcus had managed to control his surprise when they'd volunteered. At the same time, with Wai flying the MSV he was glad they weren't going to be left behind in the ship.

Once his body was sealed by the silicon, he climbed into an armoured exoskeleton with an integral cold-gas manoeuvring pack. The SII silicon would never puncture, but if he was struck by a rogue particle the armour would absorb the impact.

When the airlock's outer hatch opened, the MSV was floating 15 metres away. Marcus datavised an order into his manoeuvring pack processor, and the gas jets behind his shoulder fired, pushing him towards the small egg-shaped vehicle. Wai extended two of the MSV's three waldo arms in greeting. Each of them ended in a simple metal grid, with a pair of boot clamps on both sides.

Once all four of her passengers were locked into place, Wai piloted the MSV in towards the disc. The rock particle had a slow, erratic tumble, taking 120 hours to complete its cycle. As she approached, the flattish surface with the dish was just turning into the sunlight. It was a strange kind of dawn, the rock's crumpled grey-brown crust speckled by the sharp black shadows of its own rolling prominences, while the dish was a lake of infinite black, broken only by the jagged spire of the horn rising from its centre. The xenoc ship was already exposed to the amber light, casting its bloated sundial shadow across the featureless glassy cliff. She could see the ripple of different ores and mineral strata frozen below the glazed surface, deluding her for a moment that she was flying towards a mountain of cut and polished onyx.

Then again, if Victoria's theory was right, she could well be.

"Take us in towards the top of the wedge," Marcus datavised. "There's a series of darker rectangles there."

"Will do," she responded. The MSV's chemical thrusters pulsed in compliance.

"Do you see the colour difference near the frayed edges of the shell?" Schutz asked. "The stuff's turning grey. It's as if the decay is creeping inwards."

"They must be using something like our molecular binding force generators to resist vacuum ablation," Marcus datavised. "That's why the main section is still intact."

"It could have been here for a long time, then."

"Yeah. We'll know better once Wai collects some samples from the tower."

There were five of the rectangles, arranged in parallel, one and a half metres long and one metre wide. The shell material below the shorter edge of each one had a set of ten grooves leading away down the curve.

"They looks like ladders to me," Antonio datavised. "Would that mean these are airlocks?"

"It can't be that easy," Schutz replied.

"Why not?" Marcus datavised. "A ship this size is bound to have more than one airlock."

"Yeah, but five together?"

"Multiple redundancy."

"With technology this good?"

"That's human hubris. The ship still blew up, didn't it?"

Wai locked the MSV's attitude 50 metres above the shell section. "The micro-pulse radar is bouncing right back at me," she informed them. "I can't tell what's below the shell, it's a perfect electromagnetic reflector. We're going to have communication difficulties once you're inside."

Marcus disengaged his boots from the grid and fired his pack's gas jets. The shell was as slippery as ice, neither stikpads nor magnetic soles would hold them to it.

"Definitely enhanced valency bonds," Schutz datavised. He was floating parallel to the surface, holding a sensor block against it. "It's a much stronger field than *Lady Mac's*. The shell composition is a real mix; the resonance scan is picking up titanium, silicon, boron, nickel, silver, and a whole load of polymers."

"Silver's weird," Marcus commented. "But if there's nickel in it our magnetic soles should've worked." He manoeuvred himself over one of the rectangles. It was recessed about five centimetres, though it blended seamlessly into the main shell. His sensor collar couldn't detect any seal lining. Half way along one side were two circular dimples, ten centimetres across. Logically, if the rectangle was an airlock, then these should be the controls. Human back-ups were kept simple. This shouldn't be any different.

Marcus stuck his fingers in one. It turned bright blue.

"Power surge," Schutz datavised. "The block's picking up several high voltage circuits activating under the shell. What did you do, Marcus?"

"Tried to open one."

The rectangle dilated smoothly, material flowing back to the edges. Brilliant white light flooded out.

"Clever," Schutz datavised.

"No more than our programmable silicon," Antonio retorted.

"We don't use programmable silicon for external applications."

"It settles one thing," Marcus datavised. "They weren't

Kiint, not with an airlock this size."

"Quite. What now?"

"We try to establish control over the cycling mechanism. I'll go in and see if I can operate the hatch from inside. If it doesn't open after ten minutes, try the dimple again. If that doesn't work, cut through it with the MSV's fission blade."

The chamber inside was thankfully bigger than the hatch: a pentagonal tube two metres wide and 15 long. Four of the walls shone brightly, while the fifth was a strip of dark-maroon composite. He drifted in, then flipped himself over so he was facing the hatch, floating in the centre of the chamber. There were four dimples just beside the hatch. "First one," he datavised. Nothing happened when he put his fingers in. "Second." It turned blue. The hatch flowed shut.

Marcus crashed down onto the strip of dark composite, landing on his left shoulder. The force of the impact was almost enough to jar the respirator tube out of his mouth. He grunted in shock. Neural nanonics blocked the burst of pain from his bruised shoulder.

Jesus! They've got artificial gravity.

He was flat on his back, the exoskeleton and manoeuvring pack weighing far too much. Whatever planet the xenocs came from, it had a gravity field about one and a half times that of Earth. He released the catches down the side of his exoskeleton, and wriggled his way out. Standing was an effort, but he was used to higher gees on *Lady Mac*; admittedly not for prolonged periods, though.

He stuck his fingers in the first dimple. The gravity faded fast, and the hatch flowed apart.

"We just became billionaires," he datavised.

The third dimple pressurized the airlock chamber; while the fourth depressurized it.

The xenoc atmosphere was mostly a nitrogen oxygen blend, with one per cent argon and six per cent carbon dioxide. The humidity was appalling, pressure was lower than standard, and the temperature was 42 degrees Celsius.

"We'd have to keep our SII suits on anyway, because of the heat," Marcus datavised. "But the carbon dioxide would kill us. And we'll have to go through biological decontamination when we go back to *Lady Mac*."

The four of them stood together at the far end of the airlock chamber, their exoskeleton armour lying on the floor behind them. Marcus had told Wai and the rest of the crew their first foray would be an hour.

"Are you proposing we go in without a weapon?" Jorge asked.

Marcus focused his collar sensors on the man who alleged he was a hardware technician. "That's carrying paranoia too far. No, we do not engage in first contact either deploying or displaying weapons of any kind. That's the law, and the Assembly regulations are very specific about it. In any case, don't you think that if there are any xenocs left after all this time they're going to be glad to see someone? Especially a space-faring species?"

"That is, I'm afraid, a rather naive attitude, Captain. You keep saying how advanced this starship is, and yet it suffered catastrophic damage. Frankly, an unbelievable amount of damage for an accident. Isn't it more likely this ship was engaged in some kind of battle?"

Which was a background worry Marcus had suffered right from the start. That this starship could ever fail was unnerving. But like physical constants, Murphy's Law would be the same the universe over. He'd entered the air-

lock because intuition told him the wreck was safe for him personally. Somehow he doubted a man like Jorge would be convinced by that argument.

"If it's a warship, then it will be rigged to alert any surviving crew or flight computer of our arrival. Had they wanted to annihilate us, they would have done so by now. *Lady Mac* is a superb ship, but hardly in this class. So if they're waiting for us on the other side of this airlock, I don't think any weapon you or I can carry is going to make the slightest difference."

"Very well, proceed."

Marcus postponed the answer which came straight to mind, and put his fingers in one of the two dimples by the inner hatchway. It turned blue.

The xenoc ship wasn't disappointing, exactly, but Marcus couldn't help a growing sense of anticlimax. The artificial gravity was a fabulous piece of equipment, the atmosphere strange, the layout exotic. Yet for all that, it was just a ship; built from the universal rules of logical engineering. Had the xenocs themselves been there, it would have been so different. A whole new species with its history and culture. But they'd gone, so he was an archaeologist rather than an explorer.

They surveyed the first deck, which was made up from large compartments and broad hallways. The interior was made out of a pale-jade composite, slightly ruffled to a snake-skin texture. Surfaces always curved together, there were no real corners. Every ceiling emitted the same intense white glare, which their collar sensors compensated for. Arching doorways were all open, though they could still dilate if you used the dimples. The only oddity were 50-centimetre hemispherical blisters on the floor and walls, scattered completely at random.

There was an ongoing argument about the shape of the xenocs. They were undoubtedly shorter than humans, and they probably had legs, because there were spiral stairwells, although the steps were very broad, difficult for bipeds. Lounges had long tables with large, rounded stool-chairs inset with four deep ridges.

After the first 15 minutes it was clear that all loose equipment had been removed. Lockers, with the standard dilating door, were empty. Every compartment had its fitted furnishings and nothing more. Some were completely bare.

On the second deck there were no large compartments, only long corridors lined with grey circles along the centre of the walls. Antonio used a dimple at the side of one, and it dilated to reveal a spherical cell three metres wide. Its walls were translucent, with short lines of colour slithering round behind them like photonic fish.

"Beds?" Schutz suggested. "There's an awful lot of them."

Marcus shrugged. "Could be." He moved on, eager to get down to the next deck. Then he slowed, switching his collar focus. Three of the hemispherical blisters were following him, two gliding along the wall, one on the floor. They stopped when he did. He walked over to the closest, and waved his sensor block over it. "There's a lot of electronic activity inside it," he reported.

The others gathered round.

"Are they extruded by the wall, or are they a separate device?" Schutz asked.

Marcus switched on the block's resonance scan. "I'm not sure, I can't find any break in the composite round its base, not even a hairline fracture; but with their materials technology that doesn't mean much."

"Five more approaching," Jorge datavised. The blisters were approaching from ahead, three of them on the walls, two on the floor. They stopped just short of the group.

"Something knows we're here," Antonio datavised.

Marcus retrieved the CAB xenoc interface communication protocol from a neural nanonics memory cell. He'd stored it decades ago, all qualified starship crew were obliged to carry it along with a million and one other bureaucratic lunacies. His communication block transmitted the protocol using a multi-spectrum sweep. If the blister could sense them, it had to have some kind of electromagnetic reception facility. The communication block switched to laserlight, then a magnetic pulse.

"Nothing," Marcus datavised.

"Maybe the central computer needs time to interpret the protocol," Schutz datavised.

"A desktop block should be able to work that out."

"Perhaps the computer hasn't got anything to say to us."

"Then why send the blisters after us?"

"They could be autonomous, whatever they are."

Marcus ran his sensor block over the blister again, but there was no change to its electronic pattern. He straightened up, wincing at the creak of complaint his spine made at the heavy gravity. "Okay, our hour is almost up anyway. We'll get back to *Lady Mac* and decide what stage two is going to be."

The blisters followed them all the way back to the stairwell they'd used. As soon as they started walking down the broad central hallway of the upper deck, more blisters started sliding in from compartments and other halls to stalk them.

The airlock hatch was still open when they got back, but the exoskeletons were missing.

"Shit," Antonio datavised. "They're still here, the bloody xenocs are here."

Marcus shoved his fingers into the dimple. His heartbeat calmed considerably when the hatch congealed behind them. The lock cycled obediently, and the outer rectangle opened.

"Wai," he datavised. "We need a lift. Quickly, please."

"On my way, Marcus."

"Strange way for xenocs to communicate," Schutz datavised. "What did they do that for? If they wanted to make sure we stayed, they could have disabled the airlock."

The MSV swooped over the edge of the shell, jets of twinkling flame shooting from its thrusters.

"Beats me," Marcus datavised. "But we'll find out."



Opinion on the ship was a straight split; the crew wanted to continue investigating the xenoc ship, Antonio and his colleagues wanted to leave. For once Jorge had joined them, which Marcus considered significant. He was beginning to think young Karl might have been closer to the truth than was strictly comfortable.

"The dish is just rock with a coating of aluminium sprayed on," Katherine said. "There's very little aluminium left now, most of it has boiled away in the vacuum. The tower is a pretty ordinary silicon-boron composite wrapped round a titanium load structure. The samples Wai cut off were very brittle."

"Did you carbon date them?" Victoria asked.

"Yeah." She gave her audience a laboured glance. "Give

or take a decade, it's 13,000 years old."

Breath whistled out of Marcus's mouth. "Jesus."

"Then they must have been rescued, or died," Roman said. "There's nobody left over there. Not after that time."

"They're there," Antonio growled. "They stole our exoskeletons."

"I don't understand what happened to the exoskeletons. Not yet. But any entity who can build a ship like that isn't going to go creeping round stealing bits of space armour. There has to be a rational explanation."

"Yes! They wanted to keep us over there."

"What for? What possible reason would they have for that?"

"It's a warship, it's been in battle. The survivors don't know who we are, if we're their old enemies. If they kept us there, they could study us and find out."

"After 13,000 years, I imagine the war will be over. And where did you get this battleship idea from anyway?"

"It's a logical assumption," Jorge said quietly.

Roman turned to Marcus. "My guess is that some kind of mechanoid picked them up. If you look in one of the lockers you'll probably find them neatly stored away."

"Some automated systems are definitely still working," Schutz said. "We saw the blisters. There could be others."

"That seems the most remarkable part of it," Marcus said. "Especially now we know the age of the thing. The inside of that ship was brand new. There wasn't any dust, any scuff marks. The lighting worked perfectly, so did the gravity, the humidity hasn't corroded anything. It's extraordinary. As if the whole structure has been in zero-tau. And yet only the shell is protected by the molecular bonding force generators. They're not used inside, not in the decks we examined."

"However they preserve it, they'll need a lot of power for the job, and that's on top of gravity generation and environmental maintenance. Where's that been coming from uninterrupted for 13,000 years?"

"Direct mass to energy conversion," Katherine speculated. "Or they could be tapping straight into the sun's fusion. Whatever, bang goes the Edenist He3 monopoly."

"We have to go back," Marcus said.

"NO!" Antonio yelled. "We must find the gold first. When that has been achieved, you can come back by yourselves. I won't allow anything to interfere with our priorities."

"Look, I'm sorry you had a fright while you were over there. But a power supply that works for 13,000 years is a lot more valuable than a whole load of gold which we have to sell furtively," Katherine said levelly.

"I hired this ship. You do as I say. We go after the gold."

"We're partners, actually. I'm not being paid for this flight unless we strike lucky. And now we have. We've got the xenoc ship, we haven't got any gold. What does it matter to you how we get rich, as long as we do? I thought money was the whole point of this flight."

Antonio snarled at her, and flung himself at the floor hatch, kicking off hard with his legs. His elbow caught the rim a nasty crack as he flashed through it.

"Victoria?" Marcus asked as the silence became strained. "Have the satellite arrays found any heavy metal particles yet?"

"There are definitely traces of gold and platinum, but nothing to justify a rendezvous."

"In that case, I say we start to research the xenoc wreck properly." He looked straight at Jorge. "How about you?"

"I think it would be prudent. You're sure we can continue to monitor the array satellites from here?"

"Yes."

"Good. Count me in."

"Thanks. Victoria?"

She seemed troubled by Jorge's response, even a little bewildered, but she said: "Sure."

"Karl, you're the nearest thing we've got to a computer expert. I want you over there trying to make contact with whatever control network is still operating."

"You got it."

"From now on we go over in teams of four. I want sensors put up to watch the airlocks when we're not around, and start thinking about how we communicate with people inside. Wai, you and I are going to secure *Lady Mac* to the side of the shell. Okay, let's get active, people."



Unsurprisingly, none of the standard astronautics industry vacuum epoxies worked on the shell. Marcus and Wai wound up using tether cables wrapped round the whole of the xenoc ship to hold *Lady Mac* in place.

Three hours after Karl went over, he asked Marcus to join him.

Lady Mac's main airlock tube had telescoped out of the hull to rest against the shell. There was no way it could ever be mated to the xenoc airlock rectangle, but it did allow the crew to transfer over directly without having to use exoskeleton armour and the MSV. They'd also run an optical fibre through the xenoc airlock to the interior of the ship. The hatch material closed around it forming a perfect seal, rather than cutting through it.

Marcus found Karl just inside the airlock, sitting on the floor with several processor blocks in his lap. Eight blisters were slowly circling round him; two on the wall were stationary.

"Roman was almost right," he datavised as soon as Marcus stepped out of the airlock. "Your exoskeletons were cleared away. But not by any butler mechanoid. Watch." He lobbed an empty recording flek case onto the floor behind the blisters. One of them slid over to it. The green composite became soft, then liquid. The little plastic case sank through it into the blister.

"I call them cybermice," Karl datavised. "They just scurry around keeping the place clean. You won't see the exoskeletons again, they ate them, along with anything else they don't recognize as part of the ship's structure. I imagine they haven't tried digesting us yet because we're large and active; maybe they think we're friends of the xenocs. But I wouldn't want to try sleeping over here."

"Does this mean we won't be able to put sensors up?"

"Not for a while. I've managed to stop them digesting the communication block which the optical fibre is connected to."

"How?"

He pointed to the two on the wall. "I shut them down."

"Jesus, have you accessed a control network?"

"No. Schutz and I used a micro SQUID on one of the cybermice to get a more detailed scan of its electronics. Once we'd tapped the databus traffic it was just a question of running standard decryption programmes. I can't tell you how these things work, but I have found some basic command routines. There's a deactivation code which you can datavise to them. I've also got a reactivation code, and

some directional codes. The good news is that the xenoc programme language is standardized." He stood and held a communication block up to the ceiling. "This is the deactivation code." A small circle of the ceiling around the block turned dark. "It's only localized, I haven't worked out how to control entire sections yet. We need to trace the circuitry to find an access port."

"Can you turn it back on again?"

"Oh yes." The dark section flared white again. "The codes work for the doors as well; just hold your block over the dimples."

"Be quicker to use the dimples."

"For now, yes."

"I wasn't complaining, Karl. This is an excellent start. What's your next step?"

"I want to access the next level of the cybermice programme architecture. That way I should be able to load recognition patterns in their memory. Once I can do that I'll enter our equipment, and they should leave it alone. But that's going to take a long time; *Lady Mac* isn't exactly heavily stocked with equipment for this kind of work. Of course, once I do get deeper into their management routines we should be able to learn a lot about their internal systems. From what I can make out the cybermice are built around a molecular synthesizer." He switched on a fission knife, its ten-centimetre blade glowing a pale yellow under the ceiling's glare. It scored a dark smouldering scar in the floor composite.

A cybermouse immediately slipped towards the blemish. This time when the composite softened the charred granules were sucked down, and the small valley closed up.

"Exactly the same thickness and molecular structure as before," Karl datavised. "That's why the ship's interior looks brand new, and everything's still working flawlessly after 13,000 years. The cybermice keep regenerating it. Just keep giving them energy and a supply of mass and there's no reason this ship won't last for eternity."

"It's almost a Von Neumann machine, isn't it?"

"Close. I expect a synthesizer this small has limits. After all, if it could reproduce anything, they would have built themselves another starship. But the principle's here, Captain. We can learn and expand on it. Think of the effect a unit like this will have on our manufacturing industry."

Marcus was glad he was in an SII suit, it blocked any give-away facial expressions. Replicator technology would be a true revolution, restructuring every aspect of human society, Adamist and Edenist alike. And revolutions never favoured the old.

I just came here for the money, not to destroy a way of life for 800 star systems.

"That's good, Karl. Where did the others go?"

"Down to the third deck. Once we solved the puzzle of the disappearing exoskeletons, they decided it was safe to start exploring again."

"Fair enough, I'll go down and join them."



"I cannot believe you agreed to help them," Antonio stormed. "You of all people. You know how much the cause is depending on us."

Jorge gave him a hollow smile. They were together in his sleeping cubicle, which made it very cramped. But it was one place on the starship he knew for certain no sensors were operational; a block he'd brought with him had

made sure of that. "The cause has become dependent on your project. There's a difference."

"What are you talking about?"

"Those detector satellites cost us a million and a half fuseodollars each; and most of that money came from sources who will require repayment no matter what the outcome of our struggle."

"The satellites are a hell of a lot cheaper than anti-matter."

"Indeed so. But they are worthless to us unless they find pitchblende."

"We'll find it. Victoria says there are plenty of traces. It's only a question of time before we get a big one."

"Maybe. It was a good idea, Antonio, I'm not criticising. Fusion bomb components are not easily obtainable to a novice political organization with limited resources. One mistake, and the intelligence agencies would wipe us out. No, old-fashioned fission was a viable alternative. Even if we couldn't process the uranium up to weapons-quality, we can still use it as a lethal large-scale contaminate. As you say, we couldn't lose. Sonora would gain independence, and we would form the first government, with full access to the Treasury. Everyone would be reimbursed for their individual contribution to the liberation."

"So why are we mucking about in a pile of xenoc junk? Just back me up, Jorge, please. Calvert will leave it alone if we both pressure him."

"Because, Antonio, this piece of so-called xenoc junk has changed the rules of the game. In fact we're not even playing the same game any more. Gravity generation, an inexhaustible power supply, molecular synthesis, and if Karl can access the control network he might even find the blueprints to build whatever stardrive they used. Are you aware of the impact such a spectrum of radical technologies will have upon the Confederation when released all together? Entire industries will collapse from overnight obsolescence. There will be an economic depression the like of which we haven't seen since before the invention of the ZTT drive. It will take decades for the human race to return to the kind of stability we enjoy today. We will be richer and stronger because of it; but the transition years, ah... I would not like to be a citizen in an asteroid settlement that has just blackmailed the founding company into premature independence. Who is going to loan an asteroid such as that the funds to re-equip our industrial stations, eh?"

"I... I hadn't thought of that."

"Neither has the crew. Except for Calvert. Look at his face next time you talk to him, Antonio. He knows, he has reasoned it out, and he's seen the end of his captaincy and freedom. The rest of them are lost amid their dreams of exorbitant wealth."

"So what do we do?"

Jorge clamped a hand on Antonio's shoulder. "Fate has smiled on us, Antonio. This was registered as a joint venture flight. No matter we were looking for something different. By law, we are entitled to an equal share of the xenoc technology. We are already trillionaires, my friend. When we get home we can *buy* Sonora asteroid; Holy Mother, we can buy the entire Lagrange cluster."

Antonio managed a smile, which didn't quite correspond with the dew of sweat on his forehead. "Okay, Jorge. Hell, you're right. We don't have to worry about anything any more. But..."

"Now what?"

"I know we can pay off the loan on the satellites, but what about the Crusade council? They won't like this. They might—"

"There's no cause for alarm. The council will never trouble us again. I maintain that I am right about the disaster which destroyed the xenoc ship. It didn't have an accident. That is a warship, Antonio. And you know what that means, don't you? Somewhere on board there will be weapons just as advanced and as powerful as the rest of its technology."



It was Wai's third trip over to the xenoc ship. None of them spent more than two hours at a time inside. The gravity field made every muscle ache, walking round was like being put on a crash exercise regimen.

Schutz and Karl were still busy by the airlock, probing the circuitry of the cybermice, and decrypting more of their programming. It was probably the most promising line of research; once they could use the xenoc programme language they should be able to extract any answer they wanted from the ship's controlling network. Assuming there was one. Wai was convinced there would be. The number of systems operating – life-support, power, gravity – had to mean some basic management integration system was functional.

In the meantime there was the rest of the structure to explore. She had a layout file stored in her neural nanonics, updated by the others every time they came back from an excursion. At the blunt end of the wedge there could be anything up to 40 decks, if the spacing was standard. Nobody had gone down to the bottom yet. There were some areas which had no obvious entrance; presumably engineering compartments, or storage tanks. Marcus had the teams tracing the main power lines with magnetic sensors, trying to locate the generator.

Wai plodded after Roman as he followed a cable running down the centre of a corridor on the eighth deck.

"It's got so many secondary feeds it looks like a fish-bone," he complained. They paused at a junction with five branches, and he swept the block round. "This way." He started off down one of the new corridors.

"We're heading towards stairwell five," she told him, as the layout file scrolled through her skull.

There were more cybermice than usual on deck eight; over 30 were currently pursuing her and Roman, creating strong ripples in the composite floor and walls. Wai had noticed that the deeper she went into the ship the more of them there seemed to be. Although after her second trip she'd completely ignored them. She wasn't paying a lot of attention to the compartments leading off from the corridors, either. It wasn't that they were all the same, rather that they were all similarly empty.

They reached the stairwell, and Roman stepped inside. "It's going down," he datavised.

"Great, that means we've got another level to climb up when we're finished."

Not that going down these stairs was easy, she acknowledged charily. If only they could find some kind of variable gravity chute. Perhaps they'd all been positioned in the part of the ship that was destroyed.

"You know, I think Marcus might have been right about the dish being an emergency beacon," she datavised. "I can't think of any other reason for it being built. Believe

me, I've tried."

"He always is right. It's bloody annoying, but that's why I fly with him."

"I was against it because of the faith gap."

"Say what?"

"The amount of faith these xenocs must have had in themselves. It's awesome. So different from humans. Think about it. Even if their homeworld is only 2,000 light years away, that's how long the message is going to take to reach there. Yet they sent it believing someone would still be around to receive it, and more, act on it. Suppose that was us; suppose the *Lady Mac* had an accident a thousand light years away. Would you think there was any point in sending a lightspeed message to the Confederation, then going into zero-tau to wait for a rescue ship?"

"If their technology can last that long, then I guess their civilization can, too."

"No, our hardware can last for a long time. It's our culture that's fragile, at least compared to theirs. I don't think the Confederation will last a thousand years."

"The Edenists will be here, I expect. So will all the planets, physically if nothing else. Some of their societies will advance, possibly even to a state similar to the Kiint; some will revert to barbarism. But there will be somebody left to hear the message and help."

"You're a terrible optimist."

They arrived at the ninth deck, only to find the doorway was sealed over with composite.

"Odd," Roman datavised. "If there's no corridor or compartment beyond, why put a doorway here at all?"

"Because this was a change made after the accident."

"Could be. But why would they block off an interior section?"

"I've no idea. You want to keep going down?"

"Sure. I'm optimistic enough not to believe in ghosts lurking in the basement."

"I really wish you hadn't said that."

The tenth deck had been sealed off as well.

"My legs can take one more level," Wai datavised. "Then I'm going back."

There was a door on deck 11. It was the first one in the ship to be closed.

Wai stuck her fingers in the dimple, and the door dilated. She edged over cautiously, and swept the focus of her collar sensors round. "Holy shit. We'd better fetch Marcus."



Decks nine and ten had simply been removed to make the chamber. Standing on the floor and looking up, Marcus could actually see the outline of the stairwell doorways in the wall above him. By xenoc standards it was a cathedral. There was only one altar, right in the centre. A doughnut of some dull metallic substance, eight metres in diameter with a central aperture five metres across; the air around it was emitting a faint violet glow. It stood on five sable-black arching buttresses, four metres tall.

"The positioning must be significant," Wai datavised. "They built it almost at the centre of the wreck. They wanted to give it as much protection as possible."

"Agreed," Katherine replied. "They obviously considered it important. After a ship has suffered this much damage, you don't expend resources on anything other than critical survival requirements."

"Whatever it is," Schutz reported. "It's using up an awful

lot of power." He was walking round it, keeping a respectful distance, wiping a sensor block over the floor as he went. "There's a power cable feeding each of those legs."

"Is it radiating in any spectrum?" Marcus asked.

"Only that light you can see, which spills over into ultraviolet, too. Apart from that, it's inert. But the energy must be going somewhere."

"Okay." Marcus walked up to a buttress, and switched his collar focus to scan the aperture. It was veiled by a grey haze, as if a sheet of fog had solidified across it. When he took another tentative step forward the fluid in his semi-circular canals was suddenly affected by a very strange tidal force. His foot began to slip forwards and upwards. He threw himself backwards, and almost stumbled. Jorge and Karl just caught him in time.

"There's no artificial gravity underneath it," he datavised. "But there's some kind of gravity field wrapped around it." He paused. "No, that's not right. It pushed me."

"Pushed?" Katherine hurried to his side. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"My God."

"What? Do you know what it is?"

"Possibly. Schutz, hang on to my arm, please."

The cosmonik came forward and took her left arm. Katherine edged forward until she was almost under the lambent doughnut. She stretched up her right arm, holding out a sensor block, and tried to press it against the doughnut. It was as if she was trying to make two identical magnetic poles touch. The block couldn't get to within 20 centimetres of the surface, it kept slithering and sliding through the air. She held it as steady as she could, and datavised it to run an analysis of the doughnut's molecular structure.

The results made her back away.

"So?" Marcus asked.

"I'm not entirely sure it's solid in any reference frame we understand. That surface could just be a boundary effect. There's no spectroscopic data at all, the sensor couldn't even detect an atomic structure in there, let alone valency bonds."

"You mean it's a ring of energy?"

"Don't hold me to it, but I think that thing could be some kind of exotic matter."

"Exotic in what sense, exactly?" Jorge asked.

"It has a negative energy density. And before you ask, that doesn't mean anti-gravity. Exotic matter only has one known use, to keep a wormhole open."

"Jesus, that's a wormhole portal?" Marcus asked.

"It must be."

"Any way of telling where it leads?"

"I can't give you an exact stellar coordinate; but I know where the other end has to emerge. The xenocs never called for a rescue ship, Marcus. They threaded a wormhole with exotic matter to stop it collapsing, and escaped down it. That is the entrance to a tunnel which leads right back to their homeworld."



Schutz found Marcus in the passenger lounge in capsule C. He was floating centimetres above one of the flat chairs, with the lights down low.

The cosmonik touched his heels to a stikpad on the decking beside the lower hatch. "You really don't like being wrong, do you?"

"No, but I'm not sulking about it, either." Marcus moulded a jaded grin. "I still think I'm right about the dish, but I don't know how the hell to prove it."

"The wormhole portal is rather conclusive evidence."

"Very tactful. It doesn't solve anything, actually. If they could open a wormhole straight back home, why did they build the dish? Like Katherine said, if you have an accident of that magnitude then you devote yourself completely to survival. Either they called for help, or they went home through the wormhole. They wouldn't do both."

"Possibly it wasn't their dish, they were just here to investigate it."

"Two ancient unknown xenoc races with FTL starship technology is pushing credibility. It also takes us back to the original problem: if the dish isn't a distress beacon, then what the hell was it built for?"

"I'm sure there will be an answer at some time."

"I know, we're only a commercial trader's crew, with a very limited research capability. But we can still ask fundamental questions, like why have they kept the wormhole open for 13,000 years?"

"Because that's the way their technology works. They probably wouldn't consider it odd."

"I'm not saying it shouldn't work for that long, I'm asking why their homeworld would bother maintaining a link to a chunk of derelict wreckage?"

"That is harder for logic to explain. The answer must lie in their psychology."

"That's a cop out; you can't simply cry alien at everything you don't understand. But it does bring us to my final query, if you can open a wormhole with such accuracy across God knows how many light years, why would you need a starship in the first place? What sort of psychology accounts for that?"

"All right, Marcus, you got me. Why?"

"I haven't got a clue. I've been reviewing all the file texts we have on wormholes, trying to find a solution which pulls all this together. And I can't do it. It's a complete paradox."

"There's only one thing left then, isn't there?"

Marcus turned to look at the hulking figure of the cosmonik. "What?"

"Go down the wormhole and ask them."

"Yeah, maybe I will. Somebody has to go eventually. What does our dear Katherine have to say on that subject? Can we go inside it in our SII suits?"

"She's rigging up some sensors that she can shove through the interface. That grey sheet isn't a physical barrier. She's already pushed a length of conduit tubing through. It's some kind of pressure membrane, apparently, stops the ship's atmosphere from flooding into the wormhole."

"Another billion fuseodollar gadget. Jesus, this is getting too big for us, we're going to have to prioritize." He datavised the flight computer, and issued a general order for everyone to assemble in capsule A's main lounge.



Karl was the last to arrive. The young systems engineer looked exhausted. He frowned when he caught sight of Marcus.

"I thought you were over in the xenoc ship."

"No."

"But you..." He rubbed his fingers against his temples. "Skip it."

"Any progress?" Marcus asked.

"A little. From what I can make out, the molecular synthesizer and its governing circuitry are combined within the same crystal lattice. To give you a biological analogy, it's as though a muscle is also a brain."

"Don't follow that one through too far," Roman called.

Karl didn't even smile. He took a chocolate sac from the dispenser, and sucked on the nipple.

"Katherine?" Marcus said.

"I've managed to place a visual-spectrum sensor in the wormhole. There's not much light in there, only what soaks through the pressure membrane. From what we can see it's a straight tunnel. I assume the xenocs cut off the artificial gravity under the portal so they could egress it easily. What I'd like to do next is dismount a laser radar from the MSV and use that."

"If the wormhole's threaded with exotic matter, will you get a return from it?"

"Probably not. But we should get a return from whatever is at the other end."

"What's the point?"

Three of them began to talk at once, Katherine loudest of all. Marcus held his hand up for silence. "Listen everybody, according to Confederation law if the appointed commander or designated controlling mechanism of a spaceship or free-flying space structure discontinues that control for one year and a day then any ownership title becomes null and void. Legally, this xenoc ship is an abandoned structure which we are entitled to file a salvage claim on."

"There is a controlling network," Karl said.

"It's a sub-system," Marcus said. "The law is very clear on that point. If a starship's flight computer fails, but, say, the fusion generators keep working, their governing processors do not constitute the designated controlling mechanism. Nobody will be able to challenge our claim."

"The xenocs might," Wai said.

"Let's not make extra problems for ourselves. As the situation stands right now, we have title. We can't not claim the ship because the xenocs may return at some time."

Katherine rocked her head in understanding. "If we start examining the wormhole they might come back, sooner rather than later. Is that what you're worried about?"

"It's a consideration, yes. Personally, I'd rather like to meet them. But, Katherine, are you really going to learn how to build exotic matter and open a wormhole with the kind of sensor blocks we've got?"

"You know I'm not, Marcus."

"Right. Nor are we going to find the principle behind the artificial gravity generator, or any of the other miracles on board. What we have to do is catalogue as much as we can, and identify the areas that need researching. Once we've done that we can bring back the appropriate specialists, pay them a huge salary, and let them get on with it. Don't any of you understand yet? When we found this ship, we stopped being starship crew, and turned into the highest-flying corporate executives in the galaxy. We don't pioneer any more, we designate. So, we map out the last remaining decks. We track the power cables and note what they power. Then we leave."

"I know I can crack their programme language, Marcus," Karl said. "I can get us into the command network."

Marcus smiled at the weary pride in his voice. "Nobody is going to be more pleased about that than me, Karl. One thing I do intend to take with us is a cybermouse, prefer-

ably more than one. That molecular synthesizer is the hard evidence we need to convince the banks of what we've got."

Karl blushed. "Uh, Marcus, I don't know what'll happen if we try and cut one out of the composite. So far we've been left alone; but if the network thinks we're endangering the ship. Well..."

"I'd like to think we're capable of something more sophisticated than ripping a cybermouse out of the composite. Hopefully, you'll be able to access the network, and we can simply ask it to replicate a molecular synthesizer unit for us. They have to be manufactured somewhere on board."

"Yeah, I suppose they do. Unless the cybermice duplicate themselves."

"Now that'd be a sight," Roman said happily. "One of them humping away on top of the other."



His neural nanonics time function told Karl he'd slept for nine hours. After he wriggled out of his sleep pouch he air-swam into the crew lounge and helped himself to a pile of food sachets from the galley. There wasn't much activity in the ship, so he didn't even bother to access the flight computer until he'd almost finished eating.

Katherine was on watch when he dived into the bridge through the floor hatch.

"Who's here?" he asked breathlessly. "Who else is on board right now?"

"Just Roman. The rest of them are all over on the wreck. Why?"

"Shit."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Have you accessed the flight computer?"

"I'm on watch, of course I'm accessing."

"No, not the ship's functions. The satellite analysis network Victoria set up."

Her flat features twisted into a surprised grin. "You mean they've found some gold?"

"No way. The network was reporting that satellite seven had located a target deposit three hours ago. When I accessed the network direct to follow it up I found out what the search parameters really are. They're not looking for gold, those bastards are here to get pitchblende."

"Pitchblende?" Katherine had to run a search programme through her neural nanonics encyclopedia to find out what it was. "Oh Christ, uranium. They want uranium."

"Exactly. You could never mine it from a planet without the local government knowing; that kind of operation would be easily spotted by the observation satellites. Asteroids don't have deposits of pitchblende. But planetoids do, and out here nobody is going to know that they're scooping it up."

"I knew it! I bloody knew that fable about gold mountains was a load of balls."

"They must be terrorists, or Sonora independence freaks, or black syndicate members. We have to warn the others, we can't let them back on board *Lady Mac*."

"Wait a minute, Karl. Yes, they're shits, but if we leave them over on the wreck they'll die. Even if you're prepared to do that, it's the captain's decision."

"No it isn't, not any more. If they come back then neither you, me, nor the captain is going to be in any position to make decisions about anything. They knew we'd find out about the pitchblende eventually when *Lady Mac* rendezvoused with the ore particle. They knew we wouldn't

take it on board voluntarily. That means they came fully prepared to force us. They've got guns, or weapons implants. Jorge is exactly what I said he was, a mercenary killer. We can't let them back on the ship, Katherine. We can't."

"Oh Christ," she was gripping the side of her acceleration couch in reflex. Command decision. And it was all hers.

"Can we datavise the captain?" he asked.

"I don't know. We've got relay blocks in the stairwells now the cybermice have been deactivated, but they're not very reliable; the structure plays hell with our signals."

"Who's he with?"

"He was partnering Victoria. Wai and Schutz are together; Antonio and Jorge made up the last team."

"Datavise Wai and Schutz, get them out first. Then try for the captain."

"Okay. Get Roman, and go down to the airlock chamber; I'll authorize the weapons cabinet to release some maser carbines... Shit!"

"What?"

"I can't. Marcus has the flight computer command codes. We can't even fire the thrusters without him."



Deck 14 appeared no different to any other as Marcus and Victoria wandered through it. The corridors were broad, and there were few doorways.

"About 60 per cent is sealed off," Marcus datavised. "This must be a major engineering level."

"Yeah. There's so many cables around here I'm having trouble cataloguing the grid." She was wiping a magnetic sensor block slowly from side to side as they walked.

His communication block reported it was receiving an encrypted signal from the *Lady Mac*. Sheer surprise made him halt. He retrieved the appropriate code file from a neural nanonics memory cell.

"Captain?"

"What's the problem, Katherine?"

"You've got to get back to the ship. Now, Captain, and make sure Victoria doesn't come with you."

"Why?"

"Captain, this is Karl. The array satellites are looking for pitchblende, not gold or platinum. Antonio's people are terrorists, they want to build fission bombs."

Marcus focused his collar sensors on Victoria, who was waiting a couple of metres down the corridor. "Where's Schutz and Wai?"

"On their way back," Katherine datavised. "They should be here in another five minutes."

"Okay, it's going to take me at least half an hour to get back." He didn't like to think about climbing 14 flights of stairs fast, not in this gravity. "Start prepping the ship."

"Captain, Karl thinks they're probably armed."

Marcus's communication block reported another signal coming on line.

"Karl is quite right," Jorge datavised. "We are indeed armed; and we also have excellent processor blocks and decryption programmes. Really, Captain, this code of yours is at least three years out of date."

Marcus saw Victoria turn towards him. "Care to comment on the pitchblende?" he asked.

"I admit, the material would have been of some considerable use to us," Jorge replied. "But of course, this wreck has changed the Confederation beyond recognition, has it not, Captain?"

"Possibly."

"Definitely. And so we no longer require the pitchblende."

"That's a very drastic switch of allegiance."

"Please, Captain, do not be facetious. The satellites were left on purely for your benefit; we didn't wish to alarm you."

"Thank you for your consideration."

"Captain," Katherine datavised. "Schutz and Wai are in the airlock."

"I do hope you're not proposing to leave without us," Jorge datavised. "That would be most unwise."

"You were going to kill us," Karl datavised.

"That is a hysterical claim. You would not have been hurt."

"As long as we obeyed, and helped you slaughter thousands of people."

Marcus wished Karl would stop being quite so blunt. He had few enough options as it was.

"Come now, Captain," Jorge said. "The *Lady Macbeth* is combat-capable; are you telling me you have never killed people in political disputes?"

"We've fought. But only against other ships."

"Don't try and claim the moral high ground, Captain. War is war, no matter how it is fought."

"Only when it's between soldiers; anything else is terrorism."

"I assure you, we have put our old allegiance behind us. I ask you to do the same. This quarrel is foolish in the extreme. We both have so much to gain."

And you're armed, Marcus filled in silently. Jorge and Antonio were supposed to be inspecting decks 12 and 13. It would be tough if not impossible getting back to the airlock before them. But I can't trust them on *Lady Mac*.

"Captain, they're moving," Katherine datavised. "The communication block in stairwell three has acquired them, strength one. They must be coming up."

"Victoria," Jorge datavised. "Restrain the captain and bring him to the airlock. I advise all of you on the ship to remain calm, we can still find a peaceful solution to this situation."

Unarmed combat programmes went primary in Marcus's neural nanonics. The black, featureless figure opposite him didn't move.

"Your call," he datavised. According to his tactical analysis programme she had few choices. Jorge's order implied she was armed, though a scan of her utility belt didn't reveal anything obvious other than a standard fission blade. If she went for a gun he would have an attack window. If she didn't, then he could probably stay ahead of her. She was a lot younger, but his geneered physique should be able to match her in this gravity field.

Victoria dropped the sensor block she was carrying, and moved her hand to her belt. She grabbed the multipurpose power tool and started to bring it up.

Marcus slammed into her, using his greater mass to throw her off balance. She was hampered by trying to keep her grip on the tool. His impact made her sway sideways, then the fierce xenoc gravity took over. She toppled helplessly, falling *fast*. The power tool was swinging round to point at him. Marcus kicked her hand, and the unit skittered away. It didn't slide far, the gravity saw to that.

Victoria landed with a terrible thud. Her neural nanonics medical monitor programme flashed up an alert that the impact had broken her collar bone. Axon blocks came on line, muting all but the briefest pulse of pain. It was her programmes again which made her twist round to avoid

any follow-on blow, her conscious mind was almost unaware of the fact she was still moving. A hand scrabbled for the power tool. She snatched it and sat up. Marcus was disappearing down a side corridor. She fired at him before the targeting programme even gave her an overlay grid.

"Jorge," she datavised. "I've lost him."

"Then get after him."

Marcus's collar sensors showed him a spray of incendiary droplets fizzing out of the wall barely a metre behind him. The multipurpose tool must be some kind of laser pistol. "Katherine," he datavised. "Retract *Lady Mac*'s airlock tube. Now. Close the outer hatch and codelock it. They are not to come on board."

"Acknowledged. How do we get you back?"

"Yes, Captain," Jorge datavised. "Do tell."

Marcus dodged down a junction. "Have Wai stand by. When I need her, I'll need her fast."

"You think you can cut your way out of the shell, Captain? You have a fission blade, and that shell is held together by a molecular bonding generator."

"You touch him, shithead, and we'll fry that wreck," Karl datavised. "*Lady Mac*'s got maser cannons."

"But do you have the command codes, I wonder. Captain?"

"Communication silence," Marcus ordered. "When I want you, I'll call."



Jorge's boosted muscles allowed him to ascend stairwell three at a speed which Antonio could never match. He was soon left struggling along behind. The airlock was the tactical high ground, once he had secured that, Jorge knew he'd won. As he climbed his hands moved automatically, assembling the weapon from various innocuous-looking pieces of equipment he was carrying on his utility belt.

"Victoria?" he datavised. "Have you got him?"

"No. He broke my shoulder, the bastard. I've lost him."

"Go to the nearest stairwell, I expect that's what he's done. Antonio, go back and meet her. Then start searching for him."

"Is that a joke?" Antonio asked. "He could be anywhere."

"No he's not. He has to come up. Up is where the airlock is."

"Yes, but—"

"Don't argue. And when you find him, don't kill him. We have to have him alive. He's our ticket out. Our only ticket, understand?"

"Yes, Jorge."

When he reached the airlock, Jorge closed the inner hatch and cycled the chamber. The outer hatch dilated to show him the *Lady Macbeth*'s fuselage 15 metres away. Her airlock tube had retracted, and the fuselage shield was in place.

"This is a no-win stand-off," he datavised. "Captain, please come up to the airlock. You have to deal with me, you have no choice. The three of us will leave our weapons over here, and then we can all go back on board together. And when we return to a port none of us will mention this unfortunate incident again. That is reasonable, surely?"

Schutz had just reached the bridge when they received Jorge's datavise.

"Damn! He's disconnected our cable from the communication block," Karl said. "We can't call the captain now

even if we wanted to."

Schutz rolled in mid air above his acceleration couch and landed gently on the cushioning. Restraint webbing slithered over him.

"What the hell do we do now?" Roman asked. "Without the command codes we're bloody helpless."

"It wouldn't take that long for us to break open the weapons cabinet," Schutz said. "They haven't got the captain. We can go over there and hunt them down with the carbines."

"I can't sanction that," Katherine said. "God knows what sort of weapons they have."

"Sanction it? We put it to the vote."

"It's my duty watch. Nobody votes on anything. The last order the captain gave us was to wait. We wait." She datavised the flight computer for a channel to the MSV. "Wai, status please?"

"Powering up. I'll be ready for a flight in two minutes."

"Thank you."

"We have to do something!" Karl said.

"For a start you can calm down," Katherine told him. "We're not going to help Marcus by doing anything rash. He obviously had something in mind when he told Wai to get ready."

The hatchway to the captain's cabin slid open. Marcus air-swam out and grinned round at their stupefied expressions. "Actually, I didn't have any idea what to do when I said that. I was stalling."

"How the hell did you get back on board?" Roman yelled.

Marcus looked at Katherine and gave her a lopsided smile. "By being right, I'm afraid. The dish is a distress beacon."

"So what?" she whispered numbly.

He drifted over to his acceleration couch and activated the webbing. "It means the wormhole doesn't go back to the xenoc homeworld."

"You found out how to use it!" Karl exclaimed. "You opened its other end inside the *Lady Mac*."

"No. There is no other end. Yes, they built it as part of their survival operation. It was their escape route, you were right about that. But it doesn't go somewhere; it goes *somewhen*."

Instinct had brought Marcus to the portal chamber. It was as good as any other part of the ship. Besides, the xenocs had escaped their predicament from here. In a remote part of his mind he assumed that ending up on their homeworld was preferable to capture here by Jorge. It wasn't the kind of choice he wanted to make.

He walked slowly round the portal. The pale violet emanation in the air around it remained constant, hazing the dull surface from perfect observation. That and a faint hum were the only evidence of the massive quantity of power it consumed. Its eternal stability a mocking enigma.

Despite all the logic of argument he knew Katherine was wrong. Why build the dish if you had this ability? And why keep it operational?

That factor must have been important to them. It had been built in the centre of the ship, and built to last. They'd even reconfigured the wreck to ensure it lasted. Fine, they needed reliability, and they were masters of material science. But a one-off piece of emergency equipment lasting 13,000 years? There must be a reason, and the only logical one was that they knew they would need it to remain functional so they could come back one day.

The SH suit prevented him from smiling as realization

dawned. But it did reveal a shiver ripple along his limbs as the cold wonder of the knowledge struck home.

On the *Lady Mac*'s bridge, Marcus said: "We originally assumed that the xenocs would just go into zero-tau and wait for a rescue ship; because that's what we would do. But their technology allows them to take a much different approach to engineering problems."

"The wormhole leads into the future," Roman said in astonishment.

"Almost. It doesn't lead anywhere but back to itself, so the length inside it represents time not space. As long as the portal exists you can travel through it. The xenocs went in just after they built the dish and came out again when their rescue ship arrived. That's why they built the portal to survive so long. It had to carry them through a great deal of time."

"How does that help you get here?" Katherine asked. "You're trapped over in the xenoc wreckage right now, not in the past."

"The wormhole exists as long as the portal does. It's an open tube to every second of that entire period of existence, you're not restricted which way you travel through it."



In the portal chamber Marcus approached one of the curving black buttress legs. The artificial gravity was off directly underneath the doughnut so the xenocs could rise into it. But they had been intent on travelling into the future.

He started to climb the buttress. The first section was the steepest; he had to clamp his hands behind it, and haul himself up. Not easy in that gravity field. It gradually curved over, flattening out at the top, leaving him standing above the doughnut. He balanced there precariously, very aware of the potentially lethal fall down onto the floor.

The doughnut didn't look any different from this position, a glowing ring surrounding the grey pressure membrane. Marcus put one foot over the edge of the exotic matter, and jumped.

He fell clean through the pressure membrane. There was no gravity field in the wormhole, although every movement suddenly became very sluggish. To his waving limbs it felt as if he was immersed in some kind of fluid, though his sensor block reported a perfect vacuum.

The wormhole wall was insubstantial, difficult to see in the meagre backscatter of light from the pressure membrane. Five narrow lines of yellow light materialized, spaced equidistantly around the wall. They stretched from the rim of the pressure membrane up to a vanishing point some indefinable distance away.

Nothing else happened. Marcus drifted until he reached the wall, which his hand adhered to as though the entire surface was one giant stikpad. He crawled his way back to the pressure membrane. When he stuck his hand through, there was no resistance. He pushed his head out.

There was no visible difference to the chamber outside. He datavised his communication block to search for a signal. It told him there was only the band from one of the relay blocks in the stairwells. No time had passed.

He withdrew back into the wormhole. Surely the xenocs hadn't expected to crawl along the entire length? In any case, the other end would be 13,000 years ago. Marcus retrieved the xenoc activation code from his neural nanon-

ics, and datavised it.

The lines of light turned blue.

He quickly datavised the deactivation code, and the lines reverted to yellow. This time when he emerged out into the portal chamber there was no signal at all.



"That was ten hours ago," Marcus told his crew. "I climbed out and walked back to the ship. I passed you on the way, Karl."

"Holy shit," Roman muttered. "A time machine."

"How long was the wormhole active for?" Katherine asked.

"A couple of seconds, that's all."

"Ten hours in two seconds." She paused, loading sums into her neural nanonics. "That's a year in 30 minutes. Actually, that's not so fast. Not if they were intending to travel a couple of thousand years into the future."

"You're complaining about it?" Roman asked.

"Maybe it speeds up the further you go through it," Schutz suggested. "Or more likely we need the correct access codes to vary its speed."

"Whatever," Marcus said. He datavised the flight computer and blew the tether bolts which were holding *Lady Mac* to the wreckage. "I want flight readiness status, people, please."

"What about Jorge and the others?" Karl asked.

"They only come back on board under our terms," Marcus said. "No weapons, and they go straight into zero-tau. We can hand them over to Tranquillity's serjeants as soon as we get home." Purple course vectors were rising into his mind. He fired the manoeuvring thrusters, easing *Lady Mac* clear of the xenoc shell.



Jorge saw the sparkle of bright dust as the explosive bolts fired. He scanned his sensor collar round until he found the tethers, narrow grey serpents flexing against the speckled backdrop of drab orange particles. It didn't bother him unduly. Then the small thrusters ringing the starship's equator fired, pouring out translucent amber plumes of gas.

"Katherine, what do you think you're doing?" he datavised.

"Following my orders," Marcus replied. "She's helping to prep the ship for a jump. Is that a problem for you?"

Jorge watched the starship receding, an absurdly stately movement for an artifact that big. His respirator tube seemed to have stopped supplying fresh oxygen, paralysing every muscle. "Calvert. How?" he managed to datavise.

"I might tell you some time. Right now, there are a lot of conditions you have to agree to before I allow you back on board."

Pure fury at being so completely outmanoeuvred by Calvert made him reach automatically for his weapon. "You will come back now," he datavised.

"You're not in any position to dictate terms."

Lady Macbeth was a good 200 metres away. Jorge lined the stubby barrel up on the rear of the starship. A green targeting grid flipped up over the image, and he zeroed on the nozzle of a fusion drive tube. He datavised the X-ray laser to fire. Pale white vapour spewed out of the nozzle.



"Depressurization in fusion drive three," Roman shouted. "The lower deflector coil casing is breached. He shot us,

Marcus, Jesus Christ, he shot us with an X-ray."

"What the hell kind of weapon has he got back there?" Karl demanded.

"Whatever it is, he can't have the power capacity for many more shots," Schutz said.

"Give me fire control for the maser cannons," Roman said. "I'll blast the little shit."

"Marcus!" Katherine cried. "He just hit a patterning node. Stop him."

Neuroiconic displays zipped through Marcus's mind. Ship's systems coming on line as they shifted over to full operational status, each with its own schematic. He knew just about every performance parameter by heart. Combat sensor clusters were already sliding out of their recesses. Maser cannons powering up. It would be another seven seconds before they could be aimed and fired.

There was one system with a faster response time.

"Hang on," he yelled.

Designed for combat avoidance manoeuvres, the fusion drive tubes exploded into life two seconds after he triggered their ignition sequence. Twin spears of solar-bright plasma transfixed the xenoc shell, burning through deck after deck. They didn't even strike anywhere near the airlock which Jorge was cloistered in. They didn't have to. At that range, their infrared emission alone was enough to break down his SII suit's integrity.

Superenergized ions hammered into the wreck, smashing the internal structure apart, heating the atmosphere to an intolerable pressure. Xenoc machinery detonated in tremendous energy bursts all through the structure, the units expending themselves in spherical clouds of solid light which clashed and merged into a single wavefront of destruction. The giant rock particle lurched wildly from the explosion. Drenched in a cascade of hard radiation and subatomic particles, the unicorn tower at the centre of the dish snapped off at its base to tumble away into the darkness.

Then the process seemed to reverse. The spume of light blossoming from the cliff curved in on itself, growing in brightness as it was compressed back to its point of origin.

Lady Mac's crew were straining under the five gee acceleration of the starship's flight. The inertial guidance systems started to flash priority warnings into Marcus's neural nanonics.

"We're going back," he datavised. Five gees made talking too difficult. "Jesus, five gees and it's still pulling us in." The external sensor suite showed him the contracting fireball, its luminosity surging towards violet. Large sections of the cliff were flaking free and plummeting into the conflagration. Fissures like black lightning bolts split open right across the rock.

He ordered the flight computer to power up the nodes and retract the last sensor clusters.

"Marcus, we can't jump," Katherine datavised, her face pummelled into frantic creases by the acceleration. "It's a gravitonic emission. Don't."

"Have some faith in the old girl." He initiated the jump.

An event horizon eclipsed the *Lady Macbeth's* fuselage.

Behind her, the wormhole at the heart of the newborn micro-star gradually collapsed, pulling in its gravitational field as it went. Soon there was nothing left but an expanding cloud of dark snowdust embers.



They were three jumps away from Tranquillity when

Katherine ventured into Marcus's cabin. *Lady Mac* was accelerating at a tenth of a gee towards her next jump coordinate, holding him lightly in one of the large black-foam sculpture chairs. It was the first time she'd ever really noticed his age.

"I came to say sorry," she said. "I shouldn't have doubted."

He waved limply. "*Lady Mac* was built for combat, her nodes are powerful enough to jump us out of some gravity fields. Not that I had a lot of choice. Still, we only reduced three nodes to slag, plus the one dear old Jorge damaged."

"She's a hell of a ship, and you're the perfect captain for her. I'll keep flying with you, Marcus."

"Thanks. But I'm not sure what I'm going to do after we dock. Replacing three nodes will cost a fortune. I'll be in debt to the banks again."

She pointed at the row of transparent bubbles which all held identical antique electronic circuit boards. "You can always sell some more Apollo command module guidance computers."

"I think that scam's just about run its course. Don't worry, when we get back to Tranquillity I know a captain who'll buy them from me. At least that way I'll be able to settle the flight pay I owe all of you."

"For Heaven's sake, Marcus, the whole astronautics industry is in debt to the banks. I swear I never could understand the economics behind starflight."

He closed his eyes, a wry smile quirking his lips. "We very nearly solved human economics for good, didn't we?"

"Yeah. Very nearly."

"The wormhole would have let me change the past. Their technology was going to change the future. We could have rebuilt our entire history."

"I don't think that's a very good idea. What about the

grandfather paradox for a start? How come you didn't warn us about Jorge as soon as you emerged from the wormhole?"

"Scared, I guess. I don't know nearly enough about quantum temporal displacement theory to start risking paradoxes. I'm not even sure I'm the Marcus Calvert that brought this particular *Lady Macbeth* to the xenoc wreck. Suppose you really can't travel between times, only parallel realities? That would mean I didn't escape into the past, I just shifted sideways."

"You look and sound pretty familiar to me."

"So do you. But is my crew still stuck back at their version of the wreck waiting for me to deal with Jorge?"

"Stop it," she said softly. "You're Marcus Calvert, and you're back where you belong, flying *Lady Mac*."

"Yeah, sure."

"The xenocs wouldn't have built the wormhole unless they were sure it would help them get home, their true home. They were smart people."

"And no mistake."

"I wonder where they did come from?"

"We'll never know, now." Marcus lifted his head, some of the old humour emerging through his melancholia. "But I hope they got back safe."

Peter F. Hamilton's earlier stories for *Interzone* were "Adam's Gene" (issue 75) and the popular "Eat Reecebread" (with Graham Joyce, issue 86). His current trilogy of novels, which began with *The Reality Dysfunction* (1996) and continues later this year with *The Neutronium Alchemist*, is the most whopping space opera ever written – it promises to outdo in wordage, and possibly in imagination, the collected works of his American namesake, Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977). The above story is an independent prequel to the trilogy. Peter lives in Oakham, Leicestershire.

The Third Alternative



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1996 BRITISH FANTASY AWARD WINNER

Reviewing the first three volumes of Robert Silverberg's *Majipoor* series in *Interzone* 63, I commented that he seemed to be trying to turn into Jack Vance – which you may regard as an ambition as noble as it is unattainable, or as evidence of hubris approaching madness. He has now returned to that setting with *Sorcerers of Majipoor* (Macmillan, £16.99) a prequel to the earlier books. It's not a difficult book to approach, but it offers a range of irritations.

- The planet of Majipoor is not properly visualized. It's described as having at least ten times the circumference of Old Earth, but the geo-physical and -chemical implications of that girth are never addressed.
- The technology makes no sense. Majipoor enjoys interstellar traffic, and has been colonized by several intelligent races, but there is neither radio nor telegraphy; swordsmanship and archery are the most sophisticated martial skills.
- Consequently the ambience shifts uneasily between hard sf and fantasy. At the epoch of this book belief in innumerable varieties of divination is rampant among all classes, to the distress of the rationally inclined; yet several characters experience prophetic dreams, and it is the profession of the Lady of the Isle to despatch tailored dreams to the people.

Such considerations detract from the dignity of Silverberg's plot, which is character-driven and tragic in tone.

The polity of Majipoor depends on a dual autocracy based on the adoptive principle. The senior monarch, called Pontifex, makes policy and rarely moves from the underground labyrinth which is his home and fortress; the junior, called Coronal, executes policy and frequently traverses the breadth of the planet. On the death of the Pontifex the Coronal automatically succeeds him, and is expected to nominate a younger man of high capacity to be Coronal in his stead. For obvious reasons, he may choose to elevate anyone but a son of his own.

Well enough, but as the book opens the Pontifex is gliding slowly towards death; Prestimion, the Coronal's clever but physically unimpressive heir presumptive (there can never be an heir apparent), is becoming nervous; and Korsibar, the Coronal's son, is being encouraged by variously motivated individuals to reflect that the hereditary principle has much to commend it.

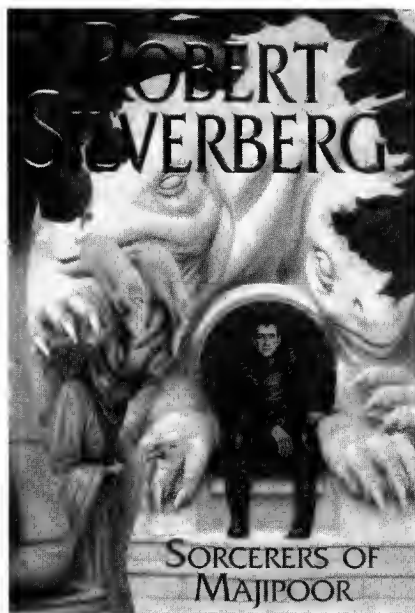
Thus a combination of malice and circumstance forces enmity on two young men of virtue and talent who had once been friends, until each sees his only security in a sequence of actions which can only culminate in civil war.

A Range of Irritations

Chris Gilmore

It's a slow-moving tale and none the worse for that; Silverberg is good at scenes of diplomacy, conspiracy and social interaction and fair at scenes of hardship, though his battles are sloggish matches. But what is essentially a melodrama in the Jacobean style would have worked better in the claustrophobic confines of a royal or ducal court; a vast, ill-conceived planet is the wrong setting, and Silverberg's heroic efforts to unify the sf and fantasy elements serve only to remind one how well Gene Wolfe did it in *The Book of the New Sun*.

Incidentally, Jim Burns's cover features a girl looking understandably peeved to hear that her breast-reduction operation has been put off *yet again*. Her misfortunes play no part in the story, but there may be a sequel...



BOOKS



REVIEWED

There is a branch of surrealist writing little practised in English, which depends for its main effect on reproducing not only the furniture and symbolism of a dream, but the mental processes of a dreamer. The trick is to preserve the atmosphere of bemused acceptance typical of the dreaming state, while employing symbolism to prevent the whole business from becoming completely arbitrary. Robert Aickman achieved it in some of his stories, as did Angela Carter in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr Hoffmann*, but the most recent and successful example that comes to mind is Ramsey Campbell's novella *Needing Ghosts*. In Europe the genre is far better established; *The Experience of Night* by Marcel Béalu (Dedalus, £8.99) is newly translated by Christine Donougher, but dates from 1945.

Suffering from weak eyesight, Marcel Adrien, the protagonist, sensibly seeks the aid of Alexandre Frohat, an ophthalmologist. Frohat offers a cure, but Adrien finds that it precipitates him into a bizarre and sordid world whose enigmatically motivated people appear to regard him as one of themselves, and immediately find a place for him. There he lives for some time, always welcome but never at ease, until in classic fairytale fashion he discovers the underlying secret of the place and feels compelled to leave.

Thus ends Part 1, "The Square," but Adrien is once again accepted in "The Avenue," which gives its name to Part 2. There the underlying symbol of seeing beyond appearances is again deployed, this time in circumstances of sybaritic luxury, but Adrien is, as before, unable to accept himself as belonging to that world. He seeks out Frohat again, who

offers to cure his eyesight in a radical manner – leading to yet other forms of acceptance in Parts 3, “The Studio,” and 4, “The Lantern.” The four parts are too structurally similar to allow much progression, and as there is no discernible allegory the ending is arbitrary; nevertheless, Béalu’s ideas are ingenious, his images are striking and I wish I could say that his translator had done them justice.

I don’t mind Gallicisms in the dialogue (French people have a right to sound French!) but they should not impose awkwardness on the narrative, even in a first-person novel. Faced with such a sentence as: “There was nothing demonic about her eyes any more that were lit only with a covetousness that was entirely human,” any competent sub-editor would re-cast it as “There was no longer anything demonic about her eyes, which were lit only with an entirely human covetousness.” Even more do I deplore Donougher’s blatant disregard for *le mot juste*. She is entirely too fond of bungling down the first word that more-or-less catches the sense, with no regard for resonance, let alone elegance. In “The Square” alone she uses “fulsome,” “vivaciousness,” “pitifulness” and (I kid you not) “temporariness,” where the sense indicates, respectively, “effusive,” “vivacity,” “pathos” and “transience.” If Béalu was anything of a writer he deserves better than that, and we certainly do. If he was sometimes unintentionally clumsy, that is no good reason not to mend him in translation; and if Dedalus can’t stretch to a sub, they might at least stand Donougher a thesaurus.

Of all known animals, the barnacle has the longest penis relative to its body-weight; hence, I presume, the well known rugby song “Barnacle Bill the Sailor.” I doubt that Lucius Shepard intended this to be my first reflection on opening his *Barnacle Bill the Spacer and Other Stories* (Orion, £16.99), but such are the hazards of literary references and Shepard is an intensely literary writer.

The title story is set in Solitaire, a space habitat with the atmosphere of hi-tech squalor allied to gross superstition that usually spells cyberpunk, though that aspect is muted here. It’s a tightly-plotted novelette written, in deliberate contrast to the sordid violence of the action, in a style so lush as to verge on the precious. Central to it is the relationship between Bill, a sort of cross between Tom Pinch and Jo Egg, and Johnny, a hard-bitten security officer. Between them they perform an act of some heroism and surpassing human importance, but its tragedy, in Johnny’s view, is that Bill can never benefit from it as Johnny will – Bill’s inadequacies are inherent and ineluctable, while Johnny has

enough understanding of his own nature to compensate for, though not to transcend, his own. My only regret is that Shepard, attempting to predict the lower-class English dialect of the future, has come up with a most unconvincing combination of stage Cockney and Mummerset.

That story and the novella “Human History” make up over half of an ill-balanced collection, the more regrettably because “Human History” is weak. It begins promisingly as a tale of the Watchers & the Watched, with echoes of many such from Aldiss’s *Non-Stop* to Anderson’s “Genesis,” but rapidly degenerates into a vapid tale of frontier-town adultery combined with Sinister Perverts from Outer Space. Shepard himself admits the “ungainly nature of the tale, its half-formed resolution, and the frayed endings and uncompleted gestures,” but that is all the more reason why he should never have let it see print.

None of the shorter pieces is anything like as bad, though none is quite as good as “Barnacle Bill.” All are studies of psychologically extreme character under extreme psychological stress, the most effective being “Beast of the Heartland,” about a prize-fighter’s struggles with advancing blindness and the corrosive knowledge that he’s on his way out at 32, and “All the Perfumes of Araby,” a tale of crime, betrayal and religious mania in near-future Egypt rather in the style of Brian Aldiss. The others, though effectively written, were for various reasons off my wavelength.

“A Little Night Music” is a “scientific” zombie story, which with the best will in the world I couldn’t take seriously; I only have layman’s knowledge of physiology, but even that’s too much. “Sports in America”

counterpoints the progress of a sequence of gangland murders against the fortunes of the Red Sox; I am no fan. “The Sun Spider,” with its shifts in personality and insistent solar imagery, put me overwhelmingly in mind of James Blish’s “Testament of Andros,” but lacked that story’s beautifully handled contrasts of style and tone.

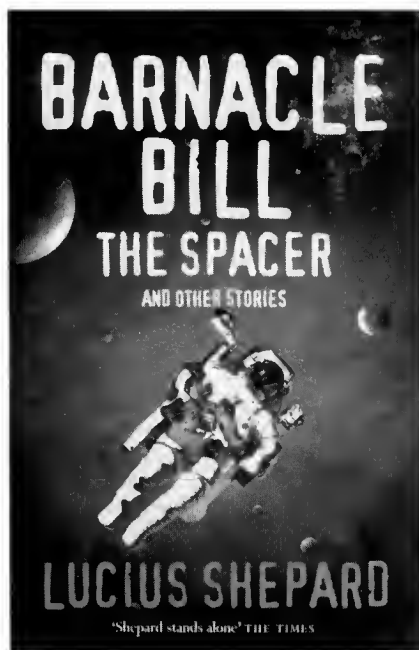
I suspect that others will get more out of this collection than I did, but at £17, and with “Human History” taking over a third of the space, my advice is to wait for the paperback.

“Human History” was doubly disappointing because sf is especially well adapted to tales of the watchers and the watched, between whom can be posited Faustian relationships of perverse intimacy, mutual incomprehension and/or layer upon layer of guilty obligation (acknowledged or not). Such tales have been a staple of sf for decades, but the modern approach is for the relationship to be mediated by mechanical or biological technology of bizarre ingenuity, and to offer the advantage (if you are old, rich and sick) of being able live much or all of your life through the perceptions of several young, athletic people with very active sex-lives.

Tricia Sullivan’s *Someone to Watch Over Me* (Orion, £16.99) begins promisingly *in medias res* with Adrien Reyes, a principal viewpoint, recovering from a savage beating received in retribution for a double cross perpetrated for the benefit of C, his watcher/controller, with whom he is satellite-linked at the thalamus level. C is very much the dominant partner, but traffic is not all one way; while C lives, *Plague of Pythons*-style, through Adrien’s experiences, C’s presence greatly enriches those experiences for Adrien; but this being a techno-thriller, each is planning to betray the other, though in very different ways.

In fact the betrayals when they come are tailored to allow Sullivan to concentrate on the relationships which develop between the homosexual Tomaj, who loves the link, the heterosexual Adrien, who cuts the link, and his girlfriend Sabina, whose destiny is to be linked in a far more intimate fashion than the other two. Meanwhile all three are being hounded by Max, a sinister figure of malign but mysterious motivation, who harbours a grudge against C.

Some of the plot mechanisms are a bit contrived; in particular there is the common problem that with so much hatred and so many lethal weapons flying about, the major antagonists seem unnaturally inhibited from bringing the book to a premature close by killing each other when they get the chance. Moreover, they are all rather extreme, which is



not unreasonable in the circumstances but tells against the story after a while; I felt as if I'd blundered into Studio 54 and couldn't find the exit. I felt much the same way about the writing, which ranges from heavily but effectively ornamented to well over the top. This describes Times Square from the viewpoint of a musi-

cian pushed to the edge of madness:

The sound of the streets of blood has all the density and richness of ocean noise, the chaotic complexity of the curling village-eating tsunami; but it's black noise, pitches found way out there in left field on a piano, timbre squeezed from the guts of earth and hung out to dry in the weightless air

that hawks and dives through these staggered geometric canyons.

Some books are hard to put down; this one needs to be put down fairly frequently to avoid overloading the purple-receptors, but it should be exhilarating in short bursts.

Chris Gilmore

We are perennially confronted with reminders, whether we need them or not, of the fact that there is no justice in the literary world. When the American magazine market was riven in two after World War I, because market research informed advertisers that the only kinds of periodicals worthy of their financial support were those read by (a) the rich or (b) women, whole genres were cast into the economic darkness of the sales-supported pulps. It mattered not at all that some of the writers working in those genres were among the finest America had ever produced, while many of those who clung to niches in the advertising-supported "slicks" were wholesale producers of insipid tripe; the former were damned to commercial purgatory while the latter were granted instant salvation.

When paperback books came along they introduced a level playing field, commercially speaking, but they were initially impotent to bridge the abyss which now separated reputable genres from those tainted by pulp uncleanness. Even writers who had never suffered the appalling ignominy of being treated as literary lepers – as Theodore Sturgeon had – found themselves forced into a ghetto if they dared to write works which employed science-fictional devices in the service of satire, as Kurt Vonnegut did. Vonnegut did manage, in the end, to escape permanent stigmatization, although it was not an easy fight; Theodore Sturgeon never did, at least while he was alive.

Vonnegut has now joined the ranks of those living American writers whose every publication and utterance is tracked by reverent scholars, dissected as soon as the print is dry and before the echoes have died away. Only a year has passed since Greenwood issued *The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut* edited by Leonard Mustazza and *The Vonnegut Encyclopedia* compiled by Marc Leeds; now, hot on their heels, comes *The Vonnegut Chronicles: Interviews and Essays* edited by Peter J. Reed and Marc Leeds (Greenwood Press, £43.95). Like its predecessors, it represents itself as a labour of love, and I shall make the charitable assumption that it is – it would, after all, be churlish to make too much of the fact that all books of this kind carry a slight but distasteful smack of smarmy sycophancy. It does how-

Tributes and Triumphs

Brian Stableford

ever, suffer – as both its predecessors did – from the unfortunate fact that Vonnegut seems to have ceased to function as a writer of power and originality at precisely the point in time when academic critics first noticed that he was one.

Player Piano, *The Sirens of Titan*, *Mother Night* and *Cat's Cradle* all belonged to the period when Vonnegut was being pointedly ignored, while the period when his every word has been subject to awed worship began with the abysmal *Breakfast of Champions* and *Slapstick* and has since seen only a partial recovery of form in such works as *Galapagos* and *Bluebeard*. This gives the essays in *The Vonnegut Chronicles* a slightly surreal quality, as the assiduous authors search second-rate pages for faint echoes of the true gold they were not around to notice when it was freshly minted, without being able to bring themselves to admit the hideous irony of their quest. That the man deserves tribute is not in doubt, but the kind of tribute which consists of a continuing deluge of fawning papers devoted to one's second- and third-rate products is not exactly a triumph.

At the end of the day, Theodore Sturgeon may be better served by posterity precisely because he failed to attract the kind of academic attention that Vonnegut has. The task of compiling *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* – of which *Killdozer!* (North Atlantic Books, \$25) is volume III – has fallen to the excellent Paul Williams, whose careful compilation of the complete short fiction of Philip K. Dick was a monument to another writer of genius whose salvation from purgatory had perforce to be posthumous. There can be no doubt at all that this is a labour of love, and a triumph too. It

is as careful as it is comprehensive and as unpretentious as it is understanding. It is far more relaxed than the Greenwood Press volume (and a hell of a lot cheaper) but it is not unrigorous; Williams is as scrupulous as any professional scholar, and far more sensitive than most, in assembling and annotating his materials.

This volume includes stories which Sturgeon wrote between 1941 and 1946, including a number of pieces written when Sturgeon was making one of several attempts to break out of the pulp ghetto and into the slicks. Only one of these – the semi-autobiographical "Noon Gun" – has been published previously. The others are minor, although "August Sixth, 1945" is a fascinating avant-gardish response to the crucial event of that day, anticipating both "Memorial" (included here) and "Thunder and Roses" (to come in volume IV), but their presence here is valuable nevertheless. They form a bridge-like arc which both connects and separates the two fine novellas that form the heart of the collection: "Killdozer!" and "The Chromium Helmet." The latter sent Sturgeon back to the waiting arms of John W. Campbell Jr, who had published almost all of the early work which he managed to sell, but Williams is clearly right to argue that it was a crucial turning-point in his work, and now that it is set in its true context we can far better understand how and why it came to be written, and how and why it constituted a new beginning for its author.

When this ten-volume set is completed it will be an invaluable record of the trials and travails of an authentically great writer of short fiction. It will be complete and comprehensive; nothing more will need to be added to it by way of analysis or commentary, although it will offer abundant scope for the attention of academic buzzards. Everyone with a serious interest in science fiction should acquire a set. If Theodore Sturgeon were able to oversee the development of this project from whatever purgatory he now inhabits, it would undoubtedly give him a great deal more satisfaction and spiritual comfort than Kurt Vonnegut can possibly feel as he contemplates *The Vonnegut Chronicles* and all its analogues – both those already extant and those which are, undoubtedly, yet to come.

Brian Stableford





As has been demonstrated recently by Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, Simon Louvish's *Resurrections From the Dustbin of History* and Mark Lawson's *Idlewild*, it is possible to write an alternative-history novel without demonstrating awareness that the form is a well-established sub-genre of science fiction. The key text for this strain of thought is not L. Sprague de Camp's *The Wheels of If* (1940), the source of the form within genre sf, but J. C. Squire's *If it Had Happened Otherwise* (1932), a collection of essays by worthies like Winston Churchill, G. K. Chesterton and Ronald Knox on topics like "If the South Had Not Won the Civil War" or "If the General Strike Had Succeeded."

In the introduction to *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (Picador, £20), editor Niall Ferguson chides Squire for the facetiousness of his contributors, noting that their approaches to their chosen subjects were essentially satirical. The essays in this new collection are rigorously not frivolous, concerning themselves not with the "parlour game" of spinning phantom timelines but with the minutiae of actual, serious, important history. This makes the book perhaps a dry read for anyone familiar with the more fanciful literature of the subject – which is all about the consequences of paths not taken rather than mapping the paths themselves.

In these essays, there is little of the playfulness that prompted Churchill to imagine a 19th century in which Disraeli was a Liberal and Gladstone a Tory. Instead, we are plunged into densely-reasoned arguments against historical determinism, examining familiar (a British America, Nazi victory in WWII, a second JFK term) and unfamiliar (Irish Home rule enacted in 1912, Britain staying out of WWI, the USSR surviving 1989) "counterfactuals." Sometimes, the contributors get so involved with what did happen that their alternative suggestions seem smothered by the deadweight of fact. In rejecting the model of Cleopatra's nose – which in sf terms is the butterfly effect, that a tiny change will have vast consequences – Ferguson's crew of historians often have to wrestle with entire rafts of political, social, military, climatic and character changes to bring about their imagined alternatives – though Ferguson himself builds a defeated Britain on a single moment at Dunkirk when the fleeing British Expeditionary Force might have been wiped out.

The big question that Ferguson tackles is with regards to the whole enterprise: we can understand why authors, whether of science fiction or not, would want to create worlds that

Counterfactuals

Kim Newman

don't and didn't exist, but why would historians waste their precious little grey cells on such frivolities? Some of his contributors, while unstinting in their actual essays, are even unconvinced enough to suggest in their pieces that they would argue on the other side in a debate about the point or pointlessness of it all. However, it gradually emerges that an important case is being made, against self-servers who decree in retrospect that any given advance or disaster was unavoidable. Though Diane Kunz argues that John Kennedy would have been as embroiled in Vietnam as Johnson, Niall Ferguson himself examines the build-up to World War One by demolishing the myth of an inevitable catastrophe that was beyond the control of statesmen.

On the whole, these essays come from economic or military historians. What is rarely considered is the aspect of the enterprise I have always found most absorbing – as regular readers will know, often to their express displeasure – the imagining of the apparently trivial consequences of a different history. It is all very well to ponder whether the Cold War could have been avoided and how that might have affected the attitudes of presidents and premiers. But without superpower tension from 1946 onwards, what would the world look like to the man on the Clapham omnibus? If JFK was in office in 1968, what would be top of the pop charts? What would the fashions be? What about films, television, newspapers, jokes, fast foods, churches? It

may be that examining this sort of thing goes beyond the scope of *Virtual History*, but it's a shame Ferguson didn't bring in a cultural historian to tackle a counterfactual along the lines of "What if James Dean had lived?" or "What if punk never happened?"

Nevertheless, despite a certain prosiness about the first few pieces – on now-abstract-seeming issues like England Without Cromwell and a British America – *Virtual History* becomes truly inspiring from Alvin Jackson's essay about an alternative Ireland, and provides a series of chapters about the big thinks of the 20th century that serve to dismantle and reassemble the time-stream we still have to live with. The pieces on WWII, the most overworked area in the field, are especially strong: with Andrew Roberts and Ferguson tackling an occupied England afresh, and Michael Burleigh conceiving of a defeated Russia. One of the hidden kinships of History and science fiction is that they pretend to be concerned with other times (Past, Future) but are actually about the Present, and from Ferguson's thoughts on the Kaiser's European Union or asides about Hitler's plans for a single European currency, we can see that the project of this book is about the choices we currently have rather than those made in the past. Underneath the parlour game are genuinely important issues, and arguments that need to be had.

Oddly, after taking such a dismissive attitude to satire – all science fiction is a sub-genre of satire, and so might be all history – Ferguson finally succumbs with an afterword that imagines a world in which *all* the alternatives considered have happened, and even steps into genuine, sf-like wickedness when he has Franklin Roosevelt, in a 1930s America of "low inflation and relaxed licensing laws," declare "the only thing we have too dear is beer itself." It's a tiny jab, but worth the wait.

Kim Newman

Editor's Note: Just to forestall possible confusion among Interzone readers, the Niall Ferguson whose book Kim Newman reviews above is not the same person as novelist Neil Ferguson, whose debut story "The Monroe Doctrine" (IZ 6, Winter 1983/84; reprinted in *Interzone: The First Anthology*, 1985) imagined a USA of 1968 in which Marilyn Monroe had become president.

One other point: I would dispute with Kim whether L. Sprague de Camp's *The Wheels of If* (1940), is "the source of the form within genre sf." Murray Leinster's brilliant (and funny, and satirical) story "Sidewise in Time" (1934) preceded the de Camp by several years – in the same magazine, *Astounding*.

It's ten years now since David Hartwell's massive horror anthology *The Dark Descent* first appeared, a decade which has seen at least one of the mass market part-volumes remaindered but which has not seen the sheer power and scope of the exercise dimmed in any way. With the "novel" now having overtaken the "short story" as the main vehicle for all literary ventures and projects – as a result of which writers are understandably less inclined to devote their principal efforts to short fiction – it is perhaps an even more important and essential volume. Thus its trade paperback release by Tor (1,000-plus pages for \$27.95) is timely to say the least.

The project stemmed from a conversation on a convention panel moderated by Hartwell during which those present – Alan Ryan, Whitley Strieber, Peter Straub, Charles L. Grant and Les Daniels – cited a long roster of authors whom they believed to be significant both to their own careers and to the genre as a whole. Hartwell was quick to point out to his fellow panellists that, although all the writers which had been mentioned had produced more than their fair share of novel-length works, they were all renowned primarily for their short-story expertise. The ensuing discussion, as Hartwell recalls in his introduction, amounted to one simple fact: "the good stuff is pretty much all short fiction."

During the three years following that panel, Hartwell did some exhaustive research and underwent lengthy (and undoubtedly enjoyable) discussions with noted writers and anthologists in the field. The result was a detailed analysis of horror literature in the form of a doorstep-sized anthology of short stories whose contents are split into three distinct headings: moral allegorical (a section entitled "The Color of Evil"); psychological metaphor ("The Medusa in the Shield"); and fantastic ("A Fabulous Formless Darkness").

It would be pointless to outline individual plotlines here. Suffice to say that the 56 featured stories – each one, and its author, introduced by editor Hartwell – represent the levels of greatness that have been achieved in the field. Bradbury, King, Bloch, Shirley Jackson, Ellison, Poe, Lovecraft, John Collier, Blackwood, Campbell, Tanith Lee, Robert Aickman, Ambrose Bierce, Dickens, Richard Matheson, Dick, Sturgeon, M. R. James, Joyce Carol Oates, Leiber, Barker and a whole host of others give a resounding ring of truth (if any were needed) to the closing statement of Hartwell's excellent 11-page introduction: "The best short fiction in modern horror is the equal of the best of all times and places." Quite so.

Without question, *The Dark*

State of the Art

Peter Crowther

Descent is an indispensable purchase for those who didn't catch it first time around.

While the undoubted value of an anthology such as *The Dark Descent* is the rich diversity of style and voice, the attraction of a good single-author collection is the opportunity to see one writer's ability to assume different styles and different voices... always, of course, managing to retain his or her own individual tone. The downside, however, can often be that that sameness of tone – not previously identified in the reading of a single story – becomes predictable and ineffective, with familiar

tenets wheeled out in a parade of poorly constructed vehicles barely capable of carrying their cargo.

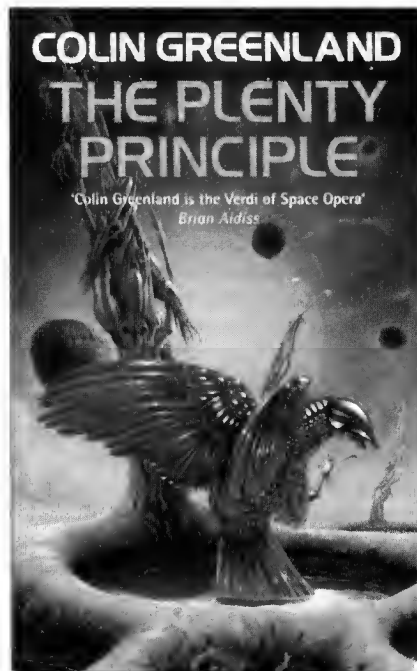
One tends to expect the unexpected from Colin Greenland but his first short-story collection, *The Plenty Principle* (Voyager, £5.99), exceeds even the wildest hopes. My own taste in short fiction tends towards the eclectic and so any collection that begins with the daughter of a disillusioned and disorientated time traveller as its first story's protagonist and then moves boldly through a further 17 bizarre (and some not so bizarre) settings before finishing with a ballsy female spaceship captain battling the physical product of an other-worldly dream pool has my undivided attention.

Using first- and third-person narratives – some in present tense, some in past – Greenland makes every area his very own playground, honing his style in much the same way as a fine actor might approach different roles to achieve different results.

Here, a young graffiti artist excitedly discovers a blank canvas for his craft in the form of a boarded-up Underground station... only to find there's more than an occasional rat in residence; there, a teenage boy is left by his parents to look after his dappy grandmother and then forgets to keep her locked in her room; and elsewhere, a lord of a distant planet experiences a little "woman trouble"... but, as always, he has a solution.

Meanwhile, on another world, a communications expert attempts to set up some kind of dialogue with a creature that resembles "an outsize pillowcase partly filled with luminous petroleum jelly" but, in the process, discovers more about himself than about his charge; a man is enticed into collecting money for charity from all the houses in his street... which seems to heighten rather than lessen his feeling of being an outsider in the community; a woman whose life-road has had more than its fair share of wrong turns discovers an unexpected strength and individuality on stage singing a Billie Holiday number; and a businessman sent to a far-off country befriends a strange woman and drives with her to her isolated cottage where he makes a wish to stay with her forever... but the woman wants both more and less than simply a lover.

Boldly emblazoned on the front cover, Brian Aldiss tells us that Greenland is "the Verdi of Space Opera," and that may well be so. But make no mistake, this is no simple E. E. Smith-style "head 'em off at the Horsehead Nebula!" collection of pulp-fiction wannabees. In fact, if I may add my own nomenclature, Greenland may well be the Zappa of the short-form – iconoclastic and





innovative, bringing to his fiction occasional softnesses and warmth to weigh against the harder moments, so filling his characters with breath and blood that we feel we can actually see them move, can understand their feelings and can believe their words.

Nowhere is this more noticeable than in his remarkably poignant and spot-on treatment of Neil Gaiman's Sandman character ("Masquerade and High Water") – in which a middle-aged man pining for his first love finds unexpected fulfilment much closer to home – or in "Candy Come Back," where an all-girl android pop group (who could just bear a passing resemblance to some recent chart-toppers) suddenly find there's more to success than tabloid column inches. There's more to it than a string of excellent novels, too, as this fine collection eloquently shows.

A couple of years back, DC Comics hit on the excellent idea of putting out gritty graphic fiction in book format under the company's new Paradox imprint. The first two titles, *La Pacifica* (written by Joel Rose and Amos Poe and illustrated by Tayyar Ozcan) and *Family Man* (words by Jerome Charyn, art by Joe Staton), didn't do the concept full justice, despite their appearance in attractive three-volume trade-paperback-sized partworks which could sit on the bookstore shelf alongside *real* books and away from the so-called "funny pages."

What happened after that is unclear but the good news is that there seems to have been some re-thinking and consolidation, with two brand new full-length (as opposed to part-work) graphic novels (*Green Candles* and *A History of Violence*) now available from Paradox via Pocket Books in luxurious 300-page trade-paperback editions.

Although aficionados of graphic novels will undoubtedly want to buy both, one of the volumes, *A History of Violence* (Pocket, \$10), deserves to appear on everyone's want's list. Written by Judge Dredd-creator John Wagner and illustrated by Vince Locke (of *Deadworld* fame), the story starts off disarmingly simply. Late one night, a couple of "cruising for thrills 'n' kills"-type bad guys stumble across a small American town and attempt to rob the local soda shop. The proprietor, Tom McKenna, fights back in true Arnie style, killing one of the men and holding the other until the police arrive. The story appears on the news, both local and national, and the man becomes something of a media celebrity. However, not everyone who sees the item hails Tom McKenna as a new Charles Bronson. The truth is that McKenna has a past in which there are some long-standing debts to be

paid and, before long, three men arrive in town to remind the local hero of his overdue "commitments." As other interested parties join in on the hunt, McKenna realizes, amidst spiralling violence and threats to his family, that he cannot continue to plead mistaken identity: he must face his past and, though he doesn't know it yet, help out an old friend.

A History of Violence is beautifully written, expertly plotted and lavishly illustrated in a sombre grainy style. With a climax that is both exquisitely dark and immensely moving, it moves like the very best *noir* movies... dialogue and dialects carefully observed and as sharp as anything from the pen of Elmore Leonard or Ed McBain. Heartily recommended. On the strength of this, Paradox is an imprint to watch out for.

Last but by no means least – and while on the subject of the darker side of crime fiction – it's worth mentioning Jerry Raine's small but perfectly formed debut, *Smalltime* (Do Not Press/Bloodlines, £5.99).

Raine works by day in London's Murder One bookshop so he of all people should know what can and cannot be done within the crime

genre... and it shows. Pitching his tale in modern day London, Raine has populated his story with a cast of struggling no-hopers who, despite taking a reluctant place in Society, are little more than one step up from Cardboard City. The book's anti-hero, Chris, lives in the local YMCA and works in an off-licence shop. One day, while carrying the shop's takings to the nearby bank's nightsafe, he gets mugged but struggles and manages to hold onto the leather wallet containing the money. For his trouble, he receives a punch in the face to add to his other bruises. Determined to track down his attacker, Chris spends time on the streets. When at last he gets lucky, he hatches a fool-proof plan to make some money... only the plan isn't quite as foolproof as he thought.

With an unerring eye for detail and dialogue, Raine spins a tale of everyday people with small dreams and neither idea of nor concern for the inevitable consequences of their actions. In Hollywood parlance, *Smalltime* is *Trainspotting*'s Irvine Welsh meets Stanley Kubrick (circa *The Killing*)... a book to read slowly and savour.

Pete Crowther

Magazine Reviews

Andy Cox

There is much discussion in the letters column of *Sierra Heaven* #3 (A4, 60pp, £3.75 or £15/4 from Alex Bardy, 29 Harrier Way, Evelyn Mews, Beckton, London E6 4YP) of traditional versus modern genre fiction, provoked by James Miller, in whose opinion *Sierra Heaven*'s fiction is bland, old-fashioned and badly written. The editor deserves credit for publishing such severe criticism – and, indeed, inviting more – but many of his correspondents seem level-headed enough to appreciate both sides of the argument. Unfortunately, there also seems to be some wilful misunderstanding of the points originally raised: it's exasperating to discover that people can somehow confuse substantial modern literature with plotless, failed experimentation. The equation is simple: the former is good fiction, the latter is bad fiction. Terms like "traditional"

and "cutting edge" are irrelevant so long as the stories meet at least some of the criteria that also make them good stories. Some of the criteria that I personally hold dear should become apparent over the next few paragraphs.

Sierra Heaven has had as many subtitles as it has issues: "For the 90s" (dropped presumably because the content wasn't at all contemporary), "For the Layman" (dropped presumably because of its condescension), and now "A Thumping Good Read." Unfortunately the magazine contains little that fits into this category either. As a matter of fact, unlike in previous issues where the poorer stories could at least be said to be harmless or diverting, some of it is utterly deplorable. Mark Gale's "A Meaningful Life" contains no characters, no exploration or development of theme, just a warped desire to

maim and kill young women. Lines like "I cannot describe the way I feel" should have alerted the editor to the fact that not only does this writer have very little to write about, he has neither the skill nor the desire to write it properly. It is even set out in the form of diary extracts so he can conveniently avoid using any kind of structure, dialogue or interaction. One of the worst, most despicable stories I've ever seen in print. The words "thumping" and "good" do indeed come to mind, just not in the way the editor had hoped.

Jason Gould, meanwhile, is building up an impressive body of work. "Salt" – set in a time when the seas have evaporated – shows clearly that here is an original voice with plenty to say, but with tortuous syntax and a not particularly gripping storyline it leaves the impression more of future promise than of present success. In "Sir Kay's Ring" Cherith Baldry's prose, pace and clarity of vision are impressive, although some might consider her skills wasted on recycled Arthurian fables. There are a couple of other stories which are just plain feeble; stories about trolls in basements, for example, badly written and steeped in cliché. Unsurprising, then, that the best story here is also the most contemporary and ambitious. "Pulp" by Ian Sales is two narratives in one: the author's own "real" life counterpointed against the imaginary life depicted in the space opera he is attempting to write. For me, the passages set in the real world are far more absorbing than those set in the escapist fantasy, and so the story never quite works as well as I would have liked it to, but the attempt is a valiant one and the story is never less than interesting.

After giving Mark Gale a good thumping I would force him to read "The Lady Rests" by Joe Hill, in the massive new issue of *Palace Corbie* (A5, colour, 330pp perfect bound, \$12.95 from Merrimack Books, PO Box 83514, Lincoln, NE 68501-3514, USA). The two stories have a vaguely similar premise in that they involve the abduction and abuse of a young lady, but whereas the rest of Gale's story is a pathetic void, Hill goes on to examine the after-effects of such a heinous act, not only on the victim but on the victim's family and carers – and it evolves into one of the most shattering, gut-wrenchingly moving stories I've ever read. The scars are emotional as well as physical, and we feel them as if they are our own; we share the father's longing that his daughter's suffering would end, for example, even if that means her death, and immediately afterwards we share his guilt for having surrendered to such a thought. The story's impetus might be abject horror but it

is actually about compassion, and the depth of compassion needed to make certain horrible choices. Not exactly light entertainment but it isn't morbid either. In fact, it's so brilliantly written it's invigorating.

Elsewhere, the millennium closes with a viral holocaust in John Pelan's "Genesis Revisited," a story which starts well by introducing some intriguing characters but which unfortunately dumps them in favour of some stock horror imagery, and Elizabeth Engstrom's analogical "Undercurrents," in which Cecily succumbs to fate while lost in the Ecuadorean jungle, is unconvincing and too ambiguous, but over 30 stories of equal merit to the Hill remain, visiting just about every level of emotion and action there is. British readers will perhaps be most familiar with Mark McLaughlin (mind-blowingly surreal), D. F. Lewis (publishes his best work here, it seems), Brian Hodge (short, snappy, terrifying fan mail) and Steve Rasnic Tem (both moving and chilling). Rounding off the issue is a marvellous mini-anthology called *The Piano Player Has No Fingers*, 14 stories that share this same title, many of which have a delicious bluesy atmosphere, all of which are very fine indeed. I cannot recommend *Palace Corbie* highly enough. I urge you to read it.

A great many magazines would suffer in comparison to the above. No shame in that, especially if you're a debut issue. In *Mind Maps* #1 (A5, 28pp, £1.26 from Mike Cobley, 11 Oakfield Avenue, Hillhead, Glasgow G12 8JF), subtitled "Enquiries in to the Surreal, the Wicked and the Blasphemous," editor Mike Cobley writes eruditely on the impact of "spinoffery" on the publishing of quality sf, but then we already knew – didn't we? – that most of this "karaoke sf" (as Cobley fetchingly terms it) hardly counts as literature. The fiction in *Mind Maps* doesn't do that much to redress the balance. It's not that the stories are bad – Ian McDonald explores the symbiotic nature of his nano-assist system quite effectively, in fact – it's just that as I scanned them with my eye-cam I couldn't help sub-vocing that if I removed all the gadgetry there wouldn't be very much of substance left. A modest opener then, but undoubtedly promising if you're into techno-driven sf.

A new issue of *Back Brain Recluse* is always an event, especially when it's been a few years since the last one. #23 (B5, 92pp, £4 from Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY) might have shrunk from A4 to a large-format paperback (but what better size for a fiction magazine?) yet it still looks magnificent, with colour cover and imaginative interior design.

The fiction content is eclectic, with several bite-sized chunks from the likes of Don Webb, Cliff Burns, Richard Kadrey and R. V. Branham, all of which contain some startling images. Of these I particularly enjoyed Don Webb's wicked "Junior Achievement" ("we have become too strange to be seen") and Richard Kadrey's "The First Man Not to Walk on the Moon," a mellow tale of "the only man on the planet who'd been to the moon twice, and never set foot on the damned thing." The others don't exactly live on in the memory.

Of the more substantial stories, Allen Ashley's reality-shifted "In Search of Guy Fawkes" is a wonderful mix of science, character, comedy, technique and nostalgia, the Shakespearean language, methinks, absolutely spot on. The tone is darker in Mike O'Driscoll's "The Ones We Need, the Ones We Leave Behind," a fascinating story of two experiment-refugees who are able to transfer telepathically from body to body. A tad overlong perhaps, since the transference from host to host is somewhat repetitive, but the emotional journey (discovering what you could get with such a gift and, ultimately, what you'd still need) is engrossing. In "The Last Day of the Carnival" Paul Kincaid describes, as if we're going through them together for the first time, the photographs he took at said carnival: a clever narrative that successfully conveys the dawning realization that the photographer has in fact captured something rather more macabre than simple ceremony. It may surprise some people (but not those who read an early issue of *The Third Alternative*) that Peter Finch, better known as a poet, writes very unnerving fiction. His contribution here is no exception: lyrically told, the menace underlying what at first glance seems like a fairly normal, if drab, suburban existence rises to the surface and brings everything, literally, to a head.

In the review section Paul Di Filippo's interview with *Cigarette Boy* author Darick Chamberlain lacks spontaneity and is often irritatingly pretentious, but Cyril Simsa's fascinating feature on "Prague: The New Left Bank" (including two translated stories by Michal Ajvaz) is essential reading for anyone interested in world science fiction. Or just world fiction, come to that. As I said, all that other stuff is irrelevant when it's good fiction.

Andy Cox is the editor of the fiction magazine *The Third Alternative* (A4, 60pp, £2.75 or £10/4 from TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB).

BOOKS RECEIVED



APRIL
1997

Anderson, Kevin J., and Doug Beason. **Fallout**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00425-3, 303pp, A-format paperback, cover by Doug Struthers, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this appears to be the second of a series of hard-sf thrillers about the adventures of FBI Special Agent Craig Kreident; the previous volume was called *Virtual Destruction* [1996].) *March 1997*.

Applegate, K. A. **The Invasion**. "Animorphs, 1." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19352-X, 184pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; first of a new series by established American children's author Katherine Applegate.) *18th April 1997*.

Banks, Iain M. **Excession**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-457-X, 455pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; according to the *Times* reviewer quoted on the back cover, "Banks has rewritten the libretto for the whole space-opera genre"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 110.) *15th May 1997*.

Barker, Clive. **Sacrament**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648264-3, 595pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996.) *1st May 1997*.

Baxter, John. **Steven Spielberg: The Unauthorised Biography**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-638444-7, xi+457pp, hardcover, £8.99. (Biography of the world's most successful sf film-maker; first published in 1996; making a serious effort to get under his enigmatic subject's skin, Baxter [erstwhile sf novelist and author of the pioneering *Science Fiction in the Cinema*, 1970] compares his subject to Ray Bradbury, quotes extensively from an interview he conducted with J. G. Ballard, and makes many other sf references; a model biography of the "unauthorised" type: recommended.) *19th May 1997*.

Bear, Greg. **Slant**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85517-6, 350pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a sequel to *Queen of Angels* [1990].) *July 1997*.

Benford, Gregory, and David Brin. **Heart of the Comet**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-436-7, 477pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; the authors' names are reversed on the cover, perhaps indicating that Brin has now overtaken Benford as a commercial draw — at least for this publisher; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 18.) *15th May 1997*.

Bova, Ben. **Moonrise**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68249-3, 613pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; set on the moon, but a typical near-future social melodrama by the would-be Harold Robbins or Arthur Hailey of the sf world, it was reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 118.) *15th May 1997*.

Bradley, Rebecca. **Scion's Lady**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06425-0, 320pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to the author's first book, *Lady in Gil* [1996].) *7th August 1997*.

Brin, David. **Infinity's Shore: Book Two of a New Uplift Trilogy**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-487-1, xiii+670pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £17.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 117.) *7th August 1997*.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **Dreamweaver's Dilemma: Short Stories and Essays**. Edited by Suford Lewis. Introduction by Lillian Stewart Carl. NE5FA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-53-6, xiv+250pp, trade paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, \$12. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1996; it contains two previously unpublished novellas, "Dreamweaver's Dilemma" and "The Adventure of the Lady on the Embankment," plus four reprinted short stories, various articles, an interview, a bibliography and other matter; reviewed by Neil Jones in *Interzone* 107.) *Late entry: February publication, received in April 1997*.

Chalker, Jack L. **The Hot-Wired Dodo: Book Three of The Wonderland Gambit**. Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38692-2, viii+355pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, \$12. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; it's dedicated to Roger Zelazny and John Brunner, "neither of whom I can truly accept as gone.") *Late entry: 13th February publication, received in April 1997*.

Christian, Deborah. **Kar Kalim**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86341-1, 316pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *August 1997*.

Cole, Allan. **When the Gods Slept: The Timura Trilogy, Volume 1**. "The towering epic fantasy saga." New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68192-6, 470pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?].) *15th May 1997*.

Cooney, Caroline B., Carol Ellis and Barbara Steiner. **Point Horror Collection 9: A Terrifying Trio in One!** Point Horror, ISBN 0-590-13896-0, 568pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Young-adult horror omnibus, first edition [?]; the three novels it contains, Cooney's *The Perfume*, Ellis's *Silent Witness* and Steiner's *The Phantom*, were first published in the USA in 1992, 1994 and 1993 respectively.) *18th April 1997*.

Cooper, Louise. **The King's Demon**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-5371-4, 314pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. Sullivan, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1996.) *15th May 1997*.

Darnton, John. **Neanderthal**. Arrow, ISBN 0-09-963101-6, xiii+402pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; a debut novel by a London-based American journalist [born 1941], this was published in UK hardcover last year by Hutchinson, but we didn't receive a review copy for the usual reason, i.e. it's "not sf" but a mainstream thriller; actually, it is sf, about the discovery of surviving Neanderthals in Tajikistan; as such, it's one of a batch of recent novels on similar "ape-man" themes: they include *Himolayo* by Nicholas Luard [1992], *Ember from the Sun* by Mark Canter [1995], and two others that we haven't seen but have heard tell of — *Esau* by Philip Kerr [1996] and *Almost Adam* by Petru Popescu [1996].) *Late entry: January publication, received in April 1997*.

Dickson, Gordon R. **The Dragon and the Gnarly King**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86157-5, 380pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the publishers give the impression that this is the third in Dickson's "Dragon" series of light fantasies, but by our count it's more like the sixth, following *The Dragon and the George* [1976], *The Dragon Knight* [1990], *The Dragon on the Border* [1992], *The Dragon at War* [1993] and *The Dragon, the Earl and the Troll* [1994].) *August 1997*.

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Gap Into Ruin: This Day All Gods Die**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-647023-8, 749pp, A-format paperback, cover by David O'Connor, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the fifth and final novel in the

"Gap" series of space operas.) *19th May 1997*.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Fourteenth Annual Collection**. St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-15703-7, xlv+594pp, C-format paperback, \$17.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at \$29.95 [not seen]; it contains stories by William Barton, Gregory Benford, James P. Blaylock, Damien Broderick, Tony Daniel [twice], Gregory Feeley, Gwyneth Jones, John Kessel, Nancy Kress, Jonathan Lethem, Maureen F. McHugh, Paul Park, Robert Reed, Mike Resnick, Charles Sheffield, Robert Silverberg, Bruce Sterling, Michael Swanwick, Cherry Wilder, Walter Jon Williams, Gene Wolfe and others; two of the stories are from *Interzone* — Stephen Baxter's "In the M5OB" and Ian McDonald's "Recording Angel"; recommended, as ever.) *June 1997*.

Evans, David. **Time Station Paris**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00441-5, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Walker, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the second of a series which began with *Time Station London* [1996], it's copyright "Bill Fawcett and Associates.") *May 1997*.

Foy, George. **The Shift**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50611-0, 518pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; by an American thriller writer who has already written at least four novels, it's "gritty urban science fiction noir" stuff, about a virtual-reality serial killer.) *8th May 1997*.

Golden, Christie. **King's Man and Thief**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00440-7, 326pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Barson, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this appears to be the author's second novel, following *Instrument of Fate*, which we did not see; she has also written at least one *Star Trek* spinoff novel; she is not to be confused with another writer, called Christopher Golden [Of Saints and Sinners, 1994, and *Angel Sauls and Devil Hearts*, 1995] — who is, perhaps, her brother?) *May 1997*.

Gordon, Frances. **Thorn: An Immortal Tale**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1800-5, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Holly Warburton, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Frances Gordon" is a pseudonym of fantasy writer Bridget Wood.) *15th May 1997*.

Gould, Stephen J. **Dinosaur in a Haystack: Reflections in Natural History**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-025672-5, xv+480pp, C-format paperback, cover by Chris Riddell, £9.99. (Popular-science essay collection, first published in the USA, 1996; Gould is not only a brilliant science-popularizer, he is also a

very conscious literary artist: the first sentence of his introduction refers to Michel de Montaigne, the 16th-century French father of the essay tradition [which came into English via Sir Francis Bacon and has always had close links with science, constituting one might say a form of "science fiction" — wholly new sense!]; Gould himself has been adding to that tradition since the early 1970s, and this is his seventh fat compendium of essays; as with previous volumes, the emphasis is mainly on biology, although one section [consisting of three essays] is entitled "Literature and Science"; highly recommended.) *Late entry: 27th Morch publication, received in April 1997.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-498-6, 18Spp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1961; the book which began Harrison's long-lived series of light space adventures.) *6th May 1997.*

Harrison, Harry. **The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge**. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-499-4, 199pp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £4.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1970; second in the series about Slippery Jim diGriz.) *6th May 1997.*

Harrison, M. John. **Signs of Life**. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-156S6-1, 2S1pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1997; it incorporates the short stories "Anima," first published in *Interzone* S8 [April 1992] and "Isobel Avens Returns to Stepney in the Spring," first published in *Little Deaths* edited by Ellen Datlow [1994]; proof copy received; the British edition was due out from Gollancz a month or two prior to this one; reviewed by Paul McAuley [from a Gollancz proof which we haven't seen] in *IZ* 120.) *August 1997.*

Hartmann, William K. **Mars Underground**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86342-X, 3S2pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a tale of life on Mars, written by someone who is actually involved in the search for such life; Arthur C. Clarke and Paul Preuss commend it; although this is his first novel, the author is a well-known astronomer and has written several successful non-fiction books.) *July 1997.*

Jones, Stephen, ed. **Dancing with the Dark: True Encounters with the Paranormal by Masters of the Macabre**. Vista, ISBN 0-575-60166-3, 351pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Anthology of new and reprint "non-fiction" accounts of the supernatural, first edition; proof copy received; contributors of original material include Joan Aiken, Sarah Ash, Mike Ashley, Peter Atkins, Stephen Bax-

ter, Ramsey Campbell and so on through the alphabet to Cherry Wilder, F. Paul Wilson, Douglas E. Winter and Gene Wolfe; Kim Newman, who has contributed to almost every other anthology Steve Jones has ever edited, is notably not present, but I don't know whether that's of any significance; Jones mentions at least one referee in his introduction: when approached, "Harlan Ellison revealed in no uncertain terms just what he thought about people who claimed to have had confrontations with the paranormal.") *26th June 1997.*

Kilworth, Garry. **The Roof of Voyaging: Book I of The Navigator Kings**. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-461-8, xvi+426pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 112.) *15th May 1997.*

Laws, Stephen. **Somewhere South of Midnight**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-66610-2, viii+S84pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Blake, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996.) *15th May 1997.*

Linaweaver, Brad, and Edward E. Kramer, eds. **Free Space**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-8S9S7-0, 3S2pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it's dedicated to Robert and Ginny Heinlein, and contains all-new space stories by Poul Anderson, John Barnes, Gregory Benford, William F. Buckley, Arthur Byron Cover, Peter Crowther, James P. Hogan, Victor Koman, Robert J. Sawyer, L. Neil Smith, William F. Wu and others; there are also poems by Ray Bradbury, Wendy McElroy [referred to by editor Linaweaver as "the only babe I managed to talk between the covers of this book"] and Robert Anton Wilson; with names like Buckley's and Koman's in there, the Heinlein dedication and the code-word "free" in the title, one detects a distinctly right-wing agenda; feminists, bleeding-heart liberals, and probably anyone who voted for Clinton or Blair, had best steer clear; however, an accompanying letter from publishers' editor David Hartwell states that one of the stories "entirely disagrees with the rest of the book" [which might this be — the John Barnes?].) *July 1997.*

McFann, Jane. **Hide and Seek**. Point Horror, ISBN 0-S90-19067-9, 201pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Young-adult horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *18th April 1997.*

McKillop, Patricia A. **Winter Rose**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00438-S, 262pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kinuko Y. Craft, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; "characteristically fresh, dainty fantasy ... tingling and affect-

ing," according to Kirkus Reviews.) *May 1997.*

Masterton, Graham. **Tooth and Claw: The Second in the New Jim Rook Series**. Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5188-8, 234pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £17.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) *29th May 1997.*

Minns, Karen Marie Christa. **Bloodsong**. Bluestocking Books [PO Box S0998, Irvine, CA 92619-0998, USA], ISBN 1-887237-08-9, 224pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Horror novel, first edition; this is lesbian vampire horror by a writer [born 1956] whose first novel, *Virago*, appeared in 1990; one critic, quoted inside, praises the author for her "believable lavender prose that tugs at the clit as well as the heart.") *April 1997.*

Palmer, Elaine, ed. **Random Factor**. Pulp Faction [PO Box 12171, London N19 3HB], ISBN 1-899571-04-3, 128pp, small-press paperback, £7.50. ("Slipstream" anthology, first edition; contributors include Steve Aylett, Jeff Noon and a host of newcomers; it's a follow-up to the same editor's and publisher's *Technopagon* [1995] and *Fission* [1996], and like its predecessors it's a very nicely-produced book — in a freaky way; subsidised by London Arts Board; the Noon story, "Blurbs," is described as the prequel to his forthcoming novel *Nymphomation*.) *9th April 1997.*

Perry, Steve. **The Digital Effect**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00439-3, 2SSpp, A-format paperback, cover by Edwin Herder, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it appears to be an sf/mystery crossover, set aboard a big orbital habitat.) *May 1997.*

Preuss, Paul. **Secret Passages**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-86346-2, 381pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "the story of a revolutionary physics experiment, set against the colorful background of the island of Crete.") *August 1997.*

Pritchard, John. **The Witching Hour**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649636-9, 378pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition; Pritchard's third medical horror novel, following his well-received *Night Sisters* [1993] and *Angels of Mourning* [1995].) *21st April 1997.*

Resnick, Mike. **Widowmaker Reborn: Volume Two of the Widowmaker Trilogy**. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-S7161-3, 297pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the second volume of an adventure trilogy of which, alas, we weren't sent the first part.) *11th July 1997.*

Rickman, Phil. **The Chalice**. "A Glastonbury ghost story." Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-64484-0, SS0pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror novel,

first edition; it seems to owe something to the works of horror novelist and mystic Dion Fortune [Violet Mary Firth, 1890-1946], who is quoted liberally throughout; novelist John Cowper Powys is also invoked.) *9th May 1997.*

Rucker, Rudy. **Freeware**. Avon, ISBN 0-380-97S09-2, x+288pp, hardcover, cover by Raquel Jaramillo, \$23. (Sf novel, first edition; we listed the simultaneous trade paperback edition a couple of months ago, but weren't aware at that time there was a hardcover; follow-up to the author's Philip K. Dick Award-winning novels *Software* and *Wetware*; an early extract from this appeared in *Interzone* 94 [Charles Platt's issue] as "The Loonies Need You.") *May 1997.*

Saul, John. **The Blackstone Chronicles, Part 5: Day of Reckoning: The Stereoscope**. Fawcett Crest, ISBN 0-449-22789-8, 84pp, A-format paperback, \$2.99. (Horror novella, first edition.) *1st June 1997.*

Scown, Penny, ed. **The Body in the Driveway**. Point, ISBN 0-S90-13644-S, 124pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tim Edmonds, £3.50. (Young-adult horror anthology, first published in New Zealand, 1995; this one is an interesting oddity in Scholastic's "Point" series [note, they're not billing it as "Point Horror," although a horror volume it certainly is]; it has been put together by the company's New Zealand subsidiary and consists of six stories by NZ writers; all the pieces have afterwords by their authors, in which they say things like "I hate horror stories, I won't read them" [Bob Kerr], "I admit that I don't usually like 'horror' stories" [Joy Cowley] and, "Being of Scots, Irish and Maori descent, I have always felt the pull of my Maori ancestry to be strongest" [Kingi McKinnon].) *18th April 1997.*

Shetterly, Will. **Dogland**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85171-S, 44Spp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *June 1997.*

Shinn, Sharon. **Jovah's Angel**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00404-0, 389pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, \$13.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Archangel*.) *May 1997.*

Smith, E. E. "Doc." **First Lensman**. "The Classic Lensman Series, 2." Ripping Publishing [PO Box 286, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9YG], ISBN 1-899884-13-0, 348pp, A-format paperback, cover by Neil Stuart Lawson, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1950; although it's numbered "2" in the series, this was actually the last to be written and didn't have a prior magazine serialization: Smith produced it as a link between the retro-fitted *Triplanetary* and the first "real" Lens-



man book, *Golothic Patrol* [see below].) *No date shown: received in April 1997.*

Smith, E. E. "Doc." **Galactic Patrol.** "The Classic Lensman Series, 3." Ripping Publishing [PO Box 286, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9YG], ISBN 1-899884-14-9, 335pp, A-format paperback, cover by Neil Stuart Lawson, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1950; previously serialized in *Astounding* in 1937-38; although it's numbered "3," this was the original beginning of the series, and if you want to get the authentic buzz — or, at any rate, a pale shadow of the thrill these books gave to 1930s teenagers — it may be best to start here...) *No date shown: received in April 1997.*

Smith, E. E. "Doc." **Triplanetary.** "The Classic Lensman Series, 1." Ripping Publishing [PO Box 286, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9YG], ISBN 1-899884-12-2, 345pp, A-format paperback, cover by Neil Stuart Lawson, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1948 [not "1950," as it states in the book]; it's based on a serial, not originally conceived as a part of the "Lensman" series, first published in *Amazing Stories* in 1934; this, along with the other volumes in the series, is the original slam-bang space-opera adventure fiction — from this we came and to this we have returned [see all the recent *Star Wars* spinoffs and rip-offs]; the entire series was previously published in Britain by Panther Books/Granada in the 1970s with memorable Chris Foss covers [not matched here, alas]; the small-press publisher is the enterprising Warren James Palmer, author of the self-published "Dyson" novels, and these are professional-looking mass-market paperbacks [though the sans-serif typeface used throughout may be a little wearying on the eye] — their only real fault is the lack of proper title pages.) *No date shown: received in April 1997.*

Smith, L. Neil. **Bretta Martyn.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85893-0, 381pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's "a sequel to *Henry Martyn*, an interstellar pirate novel in the pirate tradition of Rafael Sabatini"; so we not only have Hornblower in space — we now have Captain Blood in space...) *August 1997.*

Stephens-Payne, Phil. **Brian Stableford: Genetic Revolutionary—A Working Bibliography. Part 1: Major Items. Part 2: Minor Items.** "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 48." Galactic Central Publications [2SA Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-49-1, x+84pp and 49pp, paperbound, £5 the set. (Sf author bibliography, first edition; it's in saddle-stitched AS format — a shame it wasn't pro-

duced as one volume, perfect-bound, but presumably that proved too expensive; a full bibliography of Stableford's fiction and non-fiction is most welcome, and must have been quite a challenge to compile; recommended — although, dangerously, it includes listings of as-yet unpublished works, some of which may never see the light of day, or may do so under different titles; for example, a forthcoming book which I am editing, and which Stableford is contributing to, is listed here as *St James Guide to Harrrar amd [sic] Gothic Writers*, when in fact the correct title is *St James Guide to Horror, Ghost and Gothic Writers* — with luck it may be out in late 1997, or early 1998, from St James Press/Gale Research.) *April 1997.*

Stephens-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Margaret St Clair: Space Frontier-swoman—A Working Bibliography.** 3rd edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 15." Galactic Central Publications [2SA Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-48-3, ix+30pp, paperbound, £2. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1985; this one is in saddle-stitched AS format; Margaret St Clair is a fairly minor and semi-forgotten American name, but — again — Stephens-Payne's scholarship [and that of the late Gordon Benson, Jr.] is to be commended.) *April 1997.*

Stine, R. L. **How I Got My Shrunken Head.** "Goosebumps, 39." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19163-2, 122pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; it's copyright "Parachute Press, Inc.") *18th April 1997.*

Stine, R. L. **Trapped in Bat Wing Hall.** "Give Yourself Goosebumps, 3." Scholastic/Hippo, ISBN 0-590-19164-0, 138pp, B-format paperback, £3.50. (Interactive juvenile horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is one of a sub-series of "Goosebumps" books, done in "choose-your-own-adventure" style; it's copyright "Parachute Press, Inc.") *18th April 1997.*

Sullivan, C. W., III, ed. **The Dark Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Ninth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 71." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29477-1, xv+217pp, hardcover, £46.50. (Anthology of academic essays about various aspects of fantasy, horror and sf; first published in the USA, 1997; contributors include Allienne Becker, Kathryn Hume, Colin Manlove, Tony Magistrale, Donald E. Morse, Nicholas Ruddick and many others less well known; subjects include Peter S. Beagle, Harlan Ellison, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Stephen

King, George MacDonald, Robert Louis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and Kurt Vonnegut; there are also essays on films and "Theory"; this is the American first edition with a British price; it's distributed in the UK by Eurospar, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) *April 1997.*

Tubb, E. C. **The Return: The Last Dumarest Novel.** Introduction by Philip Harbottle. Gryphon [PO Box 209, Brooklyn, NY 11228-0209, USA], ISBN 0-936071-83-4, 194pp, small-press paperback [with dust-jacket], cover by Ron Turner, \$20 [plus \$3 postage and packing]. (Sf novel, first published in France, 1992; this is the "long-lost" 32nd novel in Tubb's space-operatic "Dumarest saga," most of which appeared from Ace Books and DAW Books in the 1960s and 1970s; a French edition came out five years ago, but this is the first-ever English-language edition.) *May 1997.*

Ware, Paul. **Flight of the Mariner.** "The epic novel of conflict and adventure in an astounding otherworld." Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-68913-7, 489pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British author, born 1960; it reads rather like an old-fashioned cross between Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Barsoom* and C. S. Lewis's *Narnia*...) *1st May 1997.*

Warren, Bill. **Set Visits: Interviews with 32 Horror and Science Fiction Filmmakers.** McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-7864-0247-4, viii+311pp, hardcover, £34.65. (Illustrated collection of interviews with sf/horror film directors, writers, actors and other personnel; first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American edition with a British price added; most of the material originated in the magazines *Starlog* and *Fangoria*, but the versions printed here are much fuller; interviewees include Rick Baker, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Crichton, Joe Dante, Jeff Goldblum, Jim Hart, Anthony Hopkins, Kathleen Kennedy, John Landis, Christopher Lee, Robert Loggia — and Sam Raimi; there's more of an emphasis on horror than sf; recommended.) *24th July 1997.*

Warrington, Freda. **Pagan Moon.** Signet, ISBN 0-45-118403-3, xii+404pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; a sequel to *Dark Cathedral* — long, lush, dark-toned, mythohistorical stuff, a bit like female Holdstock; Penguin/Signet have dropped their "Creed" imprint name at last [good! says I] and they appear to have dropped "Roc" as well [doubleplusgood!]; why a paperback house with the most famous trade-name in the world [Penguin] should have wanted to go in for this plethora of new imprints beats

me [it was always a bad thing for their sf and fantasy in particular]; now all they have to do is get rid of "Signet" and they can return to being good old Penguin again...) *24th April 1997.*

Watson, Ian. **Hard Questions.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60067-S, 288pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; this is Watson's "quantum computer" thriller; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in *Interzone* 112.) *8th May 1997.*

Watson, Ian. **Oracle.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06487-0, 287pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it features time-travel.) *September 1997.*

Welch, Jane. **The Runes of Sorcery: Book Three of the Runespell Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648201-S, xiii+466pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a swift conclusion to this debut trilogy by a new British writer, born 1964: "a magical and magnificent story of quest, battle and dragon-fire.") *6th May 1997.*

Winter, Douglas E., ed. **Millennium.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224634-1, 450pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror anthology, simultaneous first edition [published in the USA as *Revelations*]; all-original stories which explore "the workings of the human heart in the ten decades that comprise the twentieth century"; the contributors include Clive Barker, Poppy Z. Brite, Ramsey Campbell, Charles Grant, Joe R. Lansdale, Elizabeth Massie, David Morrell, Whitley Strieber and F. Paul Wilson.) *27th May 1997.*

Wolverton, Dave, ed. **L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future, Volume XII.** New Era, ISBN 1-57318-027-0, 475pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, no UK price shown. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American [Bridge Publications, Inc.] edition, which presumably has been released over here with a British price [the publishers don't say, and in fact they don't even tell us who they are: we're assuming they're still "New Era," since they are operating out of the same address in East Grinstead, West Sussex]; it contains stories by 16 new writers, plus "how-to" articles by Wolverton and others; the Hubbard people are very hit-and-miss about sending us their books — the last volume in this series we received was number nine, and goodness knows how long this twelfth volume has been out in the UK.) *No date shown: received in April 1997.*

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Writ in Blood: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86318-7, 543pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Historical horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *July 1997.*

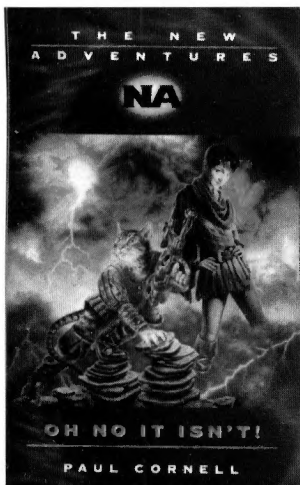
Aaronovitch, Ben, and Kate Orman. **So Vile a Sin.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20484-0, 313pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition.) May (?) 1997.

Briggs, Stephen. **Terry Pratchett's Guards! Guards! The Play.** Corgi, ISBN 0-SS2-14431-2, xix+184pp, B-format paperback, cover by Stephen Player, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy play, adapted from Pratchett's novel; first edition; another Pratchett adaptation by Briggs, *Men at Arms*, is published simultaneously with this volume, but we haven't received a review copy; nor have Corgi sent us Pratchett's most recent Discworld novel in paperback, *Feet of Clay*, but apparently it's out at the same time as these two plays.) 8th May 1997.

Carey, Diane. **Starfleet Academy.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-01550-8, 223pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Novelization of an sf TV-series spinoff game, first published in the USA, 1997; it's based on a CD-ROM of the same title, written by Diane Carey, Sandy Fries, Dan Greenberg and others; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) June 1997.

Cavelos, Jeanne. **The Shadow Within.** "Babylon S, Book #7." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2339-9, 259pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski.) 18th April 1997.

Cornell, Paul. **Oh No It Isn't!** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20507-3, 249pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, featuring the spacefaring adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who's]; first edition; this is the first in a new series of "Who-less" adventures; it will be interesting to see if Virgin can maintain the impressive sales levels they attained



Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and share-crops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

when they had the franchise for *Doctor Who* tie-ins.) 15th May 1997.

Cox, Greg. **The Black Shore.** "Star Trek: Voyager, #13." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-S6061-1, 278pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) May 1997.

David, Peter, Michael Jan Friedman and Robert Greenberger. **Wrath of the Prophets.** "Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, #20." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-S3817-9, x+274pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added; a short foreword by Greenberger sets out to explain "how three guys can manage to write a book simultaneously.") May 1997.

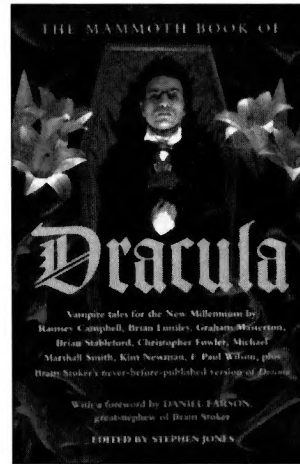
Duane, Diane. **Intellivore.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation, #4S." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-S6832-9, 239pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) April 1997.

Hambly, Barbara. **Planet of Twilight.** "Star Wars." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-S93-041-33X, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Drew Struzan, £12.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; follow-up to the same author's *Children of the Jedi*.) 15th May 1997.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner 3: Replicant Night.** Orion, ISBN 1-75280-862-1, 309pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Spinoff sf novel, a sequel by another hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and to the 1982 film based on it, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [title courtesy of the late Alan E. Nourse]; first published in the USA, 1996.) 6th May 1997.

Jones, Stephen, ed. **The Mammoth Book of Dracula: Vampire Tales for the New Millennium.** Foreword by Daniel Farson. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-S20-S, xxii+S20pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paul Aston, £6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; a follow-up to the same editor's *Mammoth Book of Frankenstein* [1994], it contains part of an early stage-play version of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* [from 1897] plus new and reprint stories by Ramsey Campbell, Peter Crowther, Christopher Fowler, Nancy Holder, Thomas Ligotti, Brian Lumley, Paul J. McAuley,

Graham Masterton, Kim Newman, Nicholas Royle, Guy N. Smith, Michael Marshall Smith, Brian Stableford, F. Paul Wilson and others; Steve Jones describes this as "a loosely-constructed 'fictionalized history' of the most memorable vampire of them all — Count Dracula," so the volume qualifies as



a collective "sequel by another hand.") 29th May 1997.

Killick, Jane. **Babylon 5 Season by Season, 1: Signs and Portents.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2308-9, 184pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf television-series history and companion, first edition; covering the first season of the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski, it contains eight pages of colour photographs.) 9th May 1997.

Lane, Andy. **The Babylon File: The Definitive Unauthorised Guide to J. Michael Straczynski's TV Series Babylon 5.** Virgin, ISBN 0-7535-0049-3, 428pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Unillustrated but very detailed episode guide to the Warner Bros. sf TV series; first edition; it also contains accounts of the spinoff novels, comics, etc; lively and opinionated.) 15th May 1997.

Lane, Andy, and Justin Richards, eds. **Decalog 4: Re:Generations—Ten Stories, a Thousand Years, One Family.** Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20505-7, 297pp, A-format paperback, cover by Colin Howard, £4.99. (Shared-universe sf anthology, first edition; it contains original stories by Liz Holliday, Ben Jeapes, Paul Leonard, Kate Orman, Lance Parkin, Alex Stewart and others.) 15th May 1997.

Lumley, Brian. **Brian Lumley's Mythos Omnibus: The Burrowers Beneath, The Transition of Titus Crow, The Clock of Dreams.** Harper-Collins, ISBN 0-00-649937-6, 6SSpp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror omnibus, first edition; it consists of pastiche Lovecraftiana, in the shared "Cthulhu Mythos" orchestrated after Lovecraft's death by August Derleth; the three novels first appeared in the USA in 1974, 1975 and 1978; it states "Volume One" on the cover, though not on the title page; a forthcoming Vol. II is mentioned on the back cover.) 21st April 1997.

Sarrantonio, Al. **Personal Agent.** "Babylon S, Book #8." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-2344-S, 212pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; inspired by the Warner Bros. TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski.) 23rd May 1997.

Shatner, William, with Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens. **Avenger.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-SS132-9, 370pp, hardcover, cover by James Wang, £12.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) 5th May 1997.

Suster, Gerald. **The God Game.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-66648-X, 373pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £5.99. (Recursive horror novel, in which "Arthur Machen, author of esoteric books, finds the evil characters of his novels coming back to torment him in the London of the 1890s"; first edition; Suster's debut novel, *The Devil's Maze* [1979], was a similar homage to Machen; after a clutch of novels in the early-to-mid 1980s, he has been away from the horror field for years, apparently writing non-fiction "on such varied subjects as the Tarot, boxing, military history, the occult roots of Nazism, the Hell-Fire Club and Aleister Crowley.") 15th May 1997.

Van Hise, James. **The Unauthorized History of Trek.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648292-9, 218pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Unillustrated, unofficial history of the *Star Trek* TV series [1966-69] and its various TV and movie spinoffs; first published in the USA, 1991 and 1995 [the provenance is not clear; it seems to be a third edition of an older work — or possibly a combination of two shorter books].) 6th May 1997.

Vornholt, John. **Mind Meld.** "Star Trek." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-00258-9, 274pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1997; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) June 1997.

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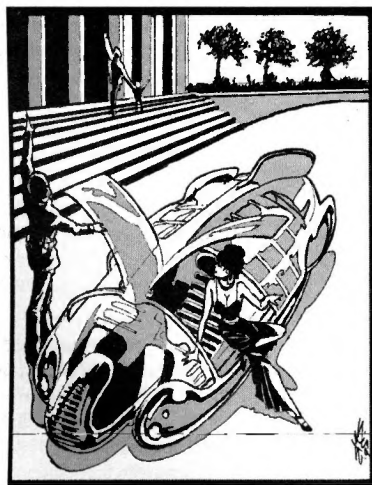
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This month's news



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THE FIFTH ELEMENT Terry Bisson

The novelisation of the first of the summer's major blockbusters, directed by arthouse supremo Luc Besson (*Nikita*, *Leon*) and starring Bruce 'top vest action' Willis, Gary 'Dracula' Oldman and Milla 'this year's Liv Tyler' Jovovich. It's 300 years into the

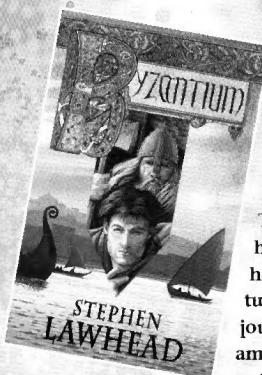
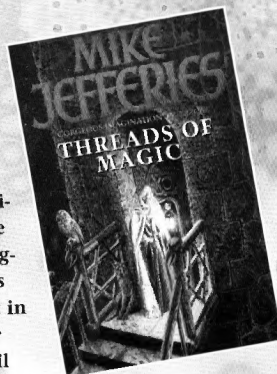
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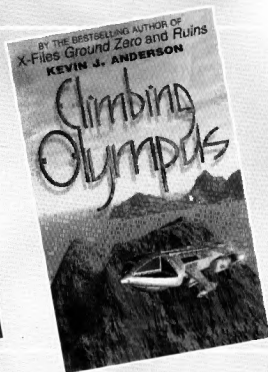
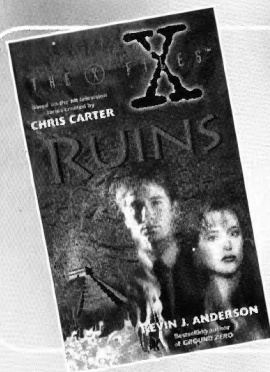
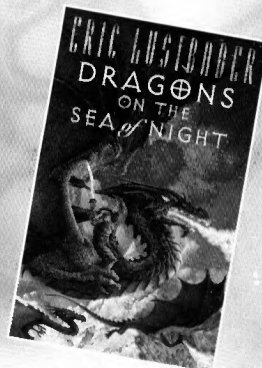
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